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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

IDEAS

Someone once asked Isaac Newton how he managed to reach solutions to problems that others found impenetrable. He answered, "By thinking and thinking and thinking about it."

I don't know what other answer people can possibly expect. There is the romantic notion that there is such a thing as "inspiration," that a heavenly Muse comes down and plunks her harp over your head and, presto, the job is done. Like all romantic notions, however, this is just a romantic notion.

Some people may be better at solving problems and getting ideas than others are; they may have a livelier imagination, a more efficient way of grasping at distant consequences; but it all comes down to thinking in the end. What counts is how well you can think, and, even more, how long and persistently you can think without breaking down. There are brilliant people, I imagine, who produce little, if anything, because their attention span to their own thoughts is so short; and there are less brilliant people who can plug away at their thoughts until they wrench something out of them.

All this comes up in my mind now because a friend of mine, a science fiction writer whose work I admire enormously, in the course of a converstion, asked, in a very embarrassed manner, "How do you get your ideas?"

I could see what the problem was. He had been having a little trouble coming up with something and he thought that perhaps he had lost the knack of getting ideas, or had never really had it, and he turned to me. After all, I write so *much* that I must have no trouble getting ideas and I might even have some special system that others could use, too.

But I answered, very earnestly, "How do I get my ideas? By thinking and thinking and thinking till I'm ready to jump out the window."

"You, too?" he said, quite obviously relieved.

"Of course," I said. "If you're having trouble, all it means is that you're one of us. After all, if getting ideas were easy, everyone in the world would be writing."

After that, I put some serious thought into the matter of getting ideas. Was there any way I could spot my own system? Was there, in

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fact, any system at all, or did one simply think at random?

I went back over what happened in my mind before I wrote my most recent novel, *Nemesis*, which Doubleday published in October 1989, and I thought it might be helpful to aspiring writers, or even just to readers, if I described the preliminary thinking that went into the novel.

It started when my Doubleday editor, Jennifer Brehl, said to me, "I'd like your next novel not to be part of a series, Isaac. I don't want it to be a Foundation novel or a Robot novel or an Empire novel. Write one that's completely independent."

So I started thinking, and this is the way it went, in brief. (I'll cut out all the false starts and dead ends and mooning about and try to trace a sensible pathway through it all.)

The Foundation novels, Robot novels, and Empire novels are all interconnected and all deal with a background in which interstellar travel at superluminal speeds is well-established. Of my previous independent novels, *The End of Eternity* deals with time travel; *The Gods Themselves* with communication between universes; and *Fantastic Voyage II* with miniaturization. In none of these is there interstellar travel.

Very well, then, let me have a new novel which exploits an entirely new background. Let it deal with the *establishment* of interstellar travel, with the first inter-

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stellar voyages. Immediately I imagined a settled Solar system, an Earth in decay, large numbers of space settlements in lunar orbit and in the asteroids. I imagined the space settlements as hostile to Earth and vice versa.

That gave me a reason for the drive to develop interstellar travel. Naturally, technological advances may be made for their own sake (as mountains are climbed "because they're there") but it helps to have a less-exalted reason. A settlement might want to get away from the Solar system to create a completely new society, profiting by past experience to avoid some of humanity's earlier mistakes.

Good, but where do they go? If they have true interstellar flight, as in my Foundation novels, they can go anywhere, but that's too much freedom. It introduces too many possibilities and not enough difficulties. If humanity is just *developing* interstellar flight, it might not be a very efficient process at first and a settlement trying to escape might find itself with a very limited range.

Now where do they go? The logical place is Alpha Centauri, the nearest star, but that is *so* logical that there's no fun to it. Well, then, what if there's another star only half as far as Alpha Centauri? That would be easier to reach.

But why haven't we seen it, if it exists? —Well, it's a red dwarf star and very dim, and besides there's a patch of interstellar dust between it and ourselves and that dims it further so that it just hasn't been noticed.

At that point, I remembered that a few years ago there was some speculation that the Sun might have a very distant red-dwarf companion that once in every revolution penetrated the comet cloud and sent some comets whizzing into the inner Solar system where one or two might occasionally collide with Earth and produce the periodic waves of life-extinction. The red dwarf was called Nemesis.

The suggestion seems to have died down, but I made use of it. My characters would go to the nearby red dwarf, which I would call Nemesis, and then use that as the name for my novel. Of course, you can't very well have a habitable planet circling a red-dwarf star, but I wanted one. It would give me greater flexibility than simply to have the settlement go into orbit about the red dwarf. That meant I had to think up a set of conditions that (if you don't question things too closely) would make it sound as though a habitable planet could exist. For that I had to invent a gas giant, with an Earth-sized satellite, and it would be the satellite that would be habitable.

Now I needed a problem. The obvious one would be that Nemesis was circling the Sun and would eventually pass through the comet cloud. I rejected that because it had been well-discussed in the media and I wanted something a little less expected. So I decided that Nemesis was an independent star that

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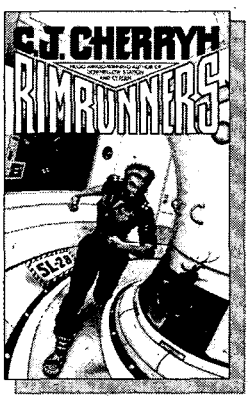

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A WORD FROM Brian Thomsen

When we think of pirates we don't usually assume they're the good guys. Yet who can think of Captain Blood without thinking of everybody's favorite swashbuckling hero Errol Flynn. He may have been an outlaw but he wasn't necessarily a villain.

Such is the case with Bet Yeager, a futuristic pirate who just happened to fight on the side that lost. As an individual, Bet is heroism personified, even if history might call her a buccaneer.

When you see me around ask me for an elf-sided view of real estate developers (or just read MYTHOLOGY 101).

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happened to be en route to a relatively near miss of the Solar system, with possibly dangerous gravitational effects.

That was a good problem, but I needed a plausible solution. That took some time but I finally thought one up. (Sorry, I won't tell you what it is. For that you'll have to read the book.)

What I needed next was a good character that would serve as the spinal column of the book, around whom everything would revolve. I chose a fourteen-year-old girl, with certain characteristics that I thought would make her interesting.

Then I needed a place to start the book. I would begin with my main character and have her do or say something that starts the chain of events that will take up the rest of the book. I made the choice and then waited no longer. I sat down and started the book.

But, you might point out that I didn't yet have the novel. All I had was the social framework, a problem, a solution, a character and a beginning. When do I make up all the details that go into the characteristically involved plot of one of my novels (and *Nemesis* is *quite* involved.)

I'm afraid that I make that up as I go along, but not without thought. Having worked out the first scene, I find that by the time I've finished that, I have the second scene in mind, at the conclusion of which I have the third scene, and so on all the way through to the ninety-fifth scene or so, which ends the novel.

To do that, I have to keep on thinking, on a smaller and more detailed scale all the time that I do the book (which takes me nine months, perhaps). I do it at the cost of lots of lost sleep and lots of lack of attention to people and things about me (including an occasional blank stare even at my dear wife, Janet, who never fails to get the alarmed notion that "something's wrong" each time I go into a spasm of thought).

But then isn't it possible that two-thirds of the way through the book I realize that toward the beginning I made a wrong turn and am now beating my way down a blind alley. It *is* possible, but it's never happened to me yet, and I don't expect it to. I always build the next scenes on whatever it is I have already done and never consider any possible alternatives. I simply have no time to start over again.

However, I don't mean to make the process sound simpler than it really is. You must take into account, in the first place, that I have a natural aptitude for this sort of thing, and, also, that I have been doing it for over half a century now, and experience counts.

Anyway, this is the closest I can come to explaining where I get my ideas. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov.

I certainly am glad that I re-subscribed to your fine magazine. If I had not, I would not have the pleasure of reading your "Editorials" section every month which gives an insight into your psyche.

I especially enjoyed your July '89 editorial, entitled "Predictions," in which you tried to counteract your reader's perceptions of your "uncanny" ability to predict future events. You proceeded to say that the true "predictor" of future events was none other than H.G. Wells. I believe that you failed to mention Jules Verne and his ability to predict things like the use of submarines and flights to the moon. Also you failed to mention the genius Leonado da Vinci, who drew up plans which predicted human powered flight in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries —long before it was even dreamed possible. Though his manuscripts, written backward to be read only by reading them in a mirror to prevent church intervention in his affairs and thoughts, were meant for himself only, he had some marvelous and uncanny "predictions."

Which brings me to a prediction I found in an SF book in a geologist's possession in the summer of 1967 while I working as his field assistant in the rugged mountains of Wyoming. However, I do not remember the author or the title. It was, to paraphrase, about a future Earth that had been wracked by a deadly virus which essentially wiped out much of the human race, except for a few hardy individuals who had a natural resistance to the disease. Thereupon, their offspring went through a period of retrograde evolution. Do you know the title and author of the book.

If you do, please send me the title to the address below.

Thank you very much!

James L. Puckett
4893 North Lariat Dr.
Castle Rock, CO 80104

I don't say that Wells is the only predictor; I merely say that he was the best. Da Vinci and Verne dealt largely with technological foresight, which is comparatively easy. Wells tended to think in terms of social response, which is more difficult, at least in my opinion. —And I'm afraid your description of the story you're interested in doesn't stir my memory.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

Having more than once called Mr. Spinrad a pompous ass, I feel bound to comment when he has the

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right stick by the right end. And since hooves aren't made for grasping, maybe he can use some help.

In "Political Science Fiction" (July, 1989) he has the most important thing dead right: "politics is as real and vivid and important a part of human life as love, sex, money, food, and art." He also has the caveat dead right: "it is certainly true that the story must be central, that propaganda is the death of art, and that the political novel is always in danger of degenerating into didacticism." Two problems: first, in his general discussion, he talks as if politics requires "a body politic"; second, in his specific examples, he seems too eager to find fault.

On that second point, I'm necessarily writing in vacuum, because I haven't read the stories: have to get to them Real Soon Now. But his discussion of them . . . well, if *Life During Wartime* equates world politics with "a crazed and petty-minded family feud," is that really opting out of the real world? Mr. Spinrad read it, I didn't, but knowing how much international politics is simply the reflection of national and local politics, I have to wonder about Mr. Spinrad's literary politics. Especially after he dismissed *Kinsman* because the politics "mostly involved career questions."

This returns me to the first problem. Politics is people, and people are politics. Whenever you get more than half a dozen people on the same job, you have politics; sometimes you get it with just two. In case Mr. Spinrad hasn't read Antony Jay's *Management and Machiavelli* (1967), modern corporations are strikingly parallel to medieval and renaissance states. Company politics, agency politics, church politics, even sewing circle politics are all politics. In focusing so exclusively on what he considers the political novel, Mr. Spinrad misses the point.

Certainly our field needs political stories, just as we need adventure stories, stories of apparatus, psychological stories, puzzle stories and all the rest. Certainly a good story needs "a believable and fully-rounded created reality," and certainly that means politics along with everything else. But Mr. Spinrad is dead wrong in saying that only stories "centrally concerned with examining political assumptions" are "truly politically engaged." Our need is not for political stories but for stories that are politically whole. (Close analogy here with that other unmentionable, sex. Obligatory sex scenes ruin a story as thoroughly as prudish omissions. We don't need more sex stories; we need more stories about people who have all their members and functions intact, including the sexual ones. Such a sexually whole story has precisely as much sex as the story itself requires.)

For an example: Mr. Spinrad probably considers Ms. Charnas's "Boobs," in that same issue, a psychological story. But in order to be a psychologcally whole story, it had to fairly express the rage of the harrassed. It reminded me, as it probably did most of your readers, of L. Sprague de Camp's "Judgment Day," another story that combines psychological insight with a slant on the politics of rage. The main difference is not the sex of the

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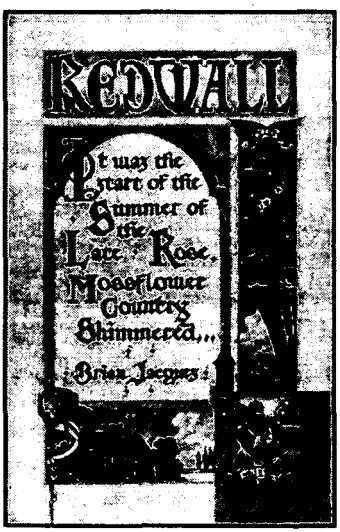

It was the Summer of the Late Rose...

The woodland community of Mossflower thrived around the abbey of Redwall. There had been peace for generations, until the Summer of the Late Rose. Even as the woodland's beauty lingered, evil invaded Redwall. It was Cluny, the scourge. The faith of generations rested on the legend of Martin and his warrior sword. But it was missing, and the peaceful kingdom was shaken by Cluny's barbaric attacks. Only one young mouse, Mathias, still believes and undertakes a quest to save Redwall.

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protagonists but their ages; the protagonist of "Judgment Day," looking back on his life, can analyze it in the way the adolescent protagonist of "Boobs" cannot. The story would ring false if she did. "Boobs" has politicized,—or has made explicit the politics, take your pick—of the werewolf tradition, as "Judgment Day" did the mad scientist.

It also reminded me of a TV show or movie I saw on TV (I forget which) that began much as did "Boobs" except for a witch instead of a werewolf as protagonist, and that copped out at the end, first by blatantly de-justifying the young witch's rage and second by showing that her mother was an even stronger witch (so where was she during part one?) and would keep her in line, so don't worry, everybody out there in televisionary-land, you can go back to sleep. "Boobs" did not cop out, anymore than "Judgment Day." The rage, the injustice that generates rage, and the further injustice generated by rage, is all there and must be coped with. No out for the audience. These are politically whole stories as the TV story was not. And only with political wholeness can they be psychologically whole, or artistically honest.

More than political stories, we must demand that all stories, whether political, adventure, psychological, apparatus or what, be politically whole; they must contain precisely as much politics as the story itself demands, and they must not cop out.

Sincerely,

Lee Burwasser
Landover, MD

I rather liked the Spinrad piece myself, but then I'm scarcely impartial here. My view of the Reagan administration is exactly like that of Norman. And when it comes to political science fiction, I think that I invented the sub-genre (or made it popular, at least) with my Foundation series. Think of it (if you've read it) and tell me what else it could be but one long discussion of galactic politics.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I have delayed writing to you for quite some time as I was not quite sure of your reaction to my address.

I have been an avid reader and subscriber to your excellent magazine for a number of years and enjoy the Letters section as much as the story content and always read it first, and would even if it didn't come in the front of the book! I believe that you are the only SF magazine that still has a letter section that actually gets a response printed along with the letter.

But on to the point of this letter.... I would like to broach a subject that has gradually gotten worse over the years and grates on my nerves and I was wondering if I am the only one that it bothers.

What is the reason that some authors write first-person stories in a cross-gender? I subconsciously tend to classify the author as the principal character in a story written in the first person. More often though I will be reading along on a good story (written by say a "Charles") and tending to think of a male type character when, all of a sudden, "he" will "pick up my

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purse" or some other such thing and I have to come to a screeching halt, re-think the whole story so far, and then continue. It is also confusing to say the least to think it is a male talking, only to be called Jo Ann or such like in the middle of the story!

Please understand that I am *not* a sexist but I feel that if a male wants to write in the first person and the principal character is a female, then he should let us know in some way in the beginning few paragraphs so as to avoid this confusion. Needless to say, and to express the other side, the same should hold true of females writing as a male character. I can see that in most story lines, the gender of the main person is not important and only rarely would it really make any difference whatsoever! I can't think of an appropriate example and will not drag this out too long anyway.

All things considered, I still consider SF as the best reading because I am not only entertained but actually learn scientific principles along the way.

Sincerely yours,

George Brooks Jr. #112526
Camp J Gar 3-R-8
Louisiana State Penitentiary
Angola, LA 70712

It's an interesting point that I haven't seen brought up before, but I see nothing wrong with a first-person story that doesn't mirror the nature of the author. The greatest American novel ever written is Huckleberry Finn *and it is told, first person, by an unsophisticated teenager, but was written by a terribly sophisticated middle-aged man, and no one complains about the disparity. Certainly, I don't. The thing to do is to disregard the author, and read the* story.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

This is the first letter I've written to your magazine. I regard *IAsfm* as the best SF magazine published today, even better than *Analog*.

The story "John Harper Wilson" in the June 1989 issue was well-done and thought-provoking. Alternate history is my specialty, and *IAsfm* publishes a lot of stories using that theme; that's one reason I like it so much.

I've followed the space program closely, and "Wilson" was an accurate depiction of what it might have been. Two points I want to raise: I'd think that with a space station in orbit in 1963, man should have gotten to the moon a lot earlier than 1969. I liked the idea of Irwin Allen producing "Star Trek;" it is very likely that William Shatner's line in the introduction of the series on that timeline was "Where No American Has Gone Before."

I'm working on alternate world stories for this magazine now, and I hope that they will be published. I like your alternate world story "Living Space"; will you be doing any other stories using the theme? Thanks for your time.

Yours truly,

Thomas Cron
Riverdale, GA

I don't think I ever thought of my story "Living Space" as dealing with an alternate society, but now

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that you mention it I realize that a little of that aspect did sneak in. My one deliberate *alternate-world story was "The Red Queen's Race." Did you ever read that?*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

My original subscription started with your first issue, published just before I attended engineering school. Unfortunately, my subscription did not keep up with me during my days at Columbia University. It wasn't until January 1987 that I picked up an issue of *IAsfm* at a bookstore in Tokyo while directing a machinery installation project. I was pleased to see that the magazine was doing well and a little disappointed in myself for not tracking down the remains of my first subscription. When I returned home, June of that same year, I resubscribed to *IAsfm* and I have not missed an issue since. Copies of the magazine have accompanied me to many different parts of the world. As a matter of fact, May and June 1989 issues were read and this letter was written in England.

I saw an ad for the "The National Space Society" in your December '88 issue. As a project design engineer, I savor the pursuit and application of high technology. Recognizing "The National Space Society" as an organization pursuing the peacetime application of high tech engineering, I gladly sent in my membership dues. Approximately two months later, I received an invitation to join the "Planetary Society" with a cover letter by you. Again, I gladly sent in my money for what I believed is a worthwhile cause. The only response I have yet to receive is acknowledgment from my bank that the checks have been cashed. No progress reports, no brochures, no magazines, no thank yous . . . nothing. Of course I know these people are busy but then again, we all are. It would be nice to know what is going on. Dr. Asimov, would you be so kind to share your thoughts regarding the existence of the so-called space societies in perhaps the form of an editorial? I would greatly appreciate it and I think it would make for very interesting reading for the readers of *IAsfm*.

I am curious about two other items. Why does *IAsfm* come out so early; almost a month and a half before the cover date. And, what is the reasoning behind the persistent "192 Pages" on every issue?

Arthur G. Coons
30 Prospect St.
Ft. Johnson, NY 12070

These various societies do publish magazines. At least I get mine in the mail regularly. I'm not involved in the direct workings of the societies, but why don't you write to them and state your complaint. Virtually all magazines date themselves early in order to get across the notion that it is not an old issue. As for giving the page number, we are trying to point out that we are giving quantity as well as quality.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I appreciate your comments on expletive language in literature. I am happy to hear your viewpoint and it is most refreshing. As a

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writer-in-training it gives me encouragement to know that editors and publishers will be more receptive than movie producers. Thank you for your influence.

Making this an open letter to your readers and writers I hope that they will strive for creativity and skill with discretion as fans of all ages will read their work. It is as easy for a writer to choose words of "common" usage as it is for water to take the easiest course down slope, yet the writer with skill and discipline will be sensitive to the audience and not try to hide behind a lack of disciplined and skilled vocabulary.

I have an inquiry for you and your readers. I have read just about all of the series and trilogies available to date. There are currently eight series that I re-read each year (i.e., Heechee, Hobbit, Myth series, Callahan's Bar, Foundation [though it is getting longer], to name some). But the one that I find to be the masterpiece of them all is *The Phoenix Legacy* by M.K. Wren. With apologies to you but I have established a criteria for which I judge the long story. Of course all these are subjective on my part, but in literature it can only be.

Back to the inquiry; has anyone any info on M.K. Wren and why she has stopped producing? Her talent is enormous.

David Larson
Alkerberke, NM

I'm in a cleft stick here. I am in the highest degree against censorship. I want all writers to express themselves as they wish, provided only that they write well. *My own desire to use civilized language only just happens to be my* own *desire, and I don't urge it on anyone else, unless, like you, they happen to have the same attitude I have.*

—Isaac Asimov

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

The January 1989 cover of *IAsfm* was recently awarded an Honorable Mention in the 1989 Ozzie Awards for Design Excellence Competition in the category Best Cover, Consumer (Under 100,000 circulation). According to Michael D. Kreiter, the publisher of *Magazine Design & Production*, the magazine which sponsors these prestigious awards, "Winning any level of the Ozzie award this year was a significant achievement. We received nearly 1,200 entries, from the best-designed publications in the U.S. and Canada. Each and every entry was carefully screened, reviewed, and evaluated by a nationwide panel of judges—demanding professionals who have won scores of national design awards themselves." We offer our congratulations to A.C. Farley, the artist responsible for the excellent artwork, and to our art director, Terri Czeczko, who designed this beautiful cover.

We are also pleased to note that Bob Eggleton's July 1988 cover received the 1989 Chesley award for Best Magazine Cover. The two other finalists in this category, Hank Jankus and Gary Freeman, were nominated for *IAsfm* covers, as well. The Chesley awards are bestowed by The Association of Science Fiction and Fantasy Artists.

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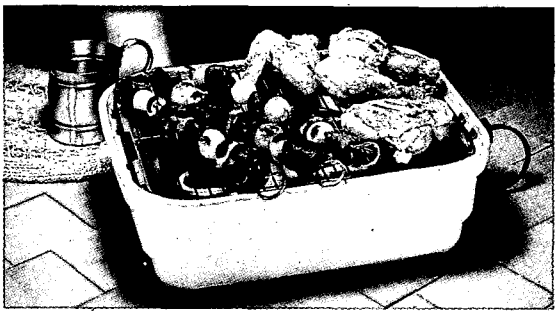

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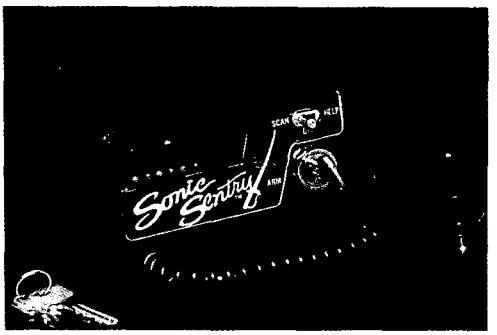

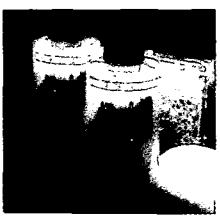

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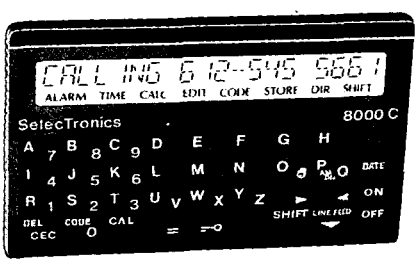

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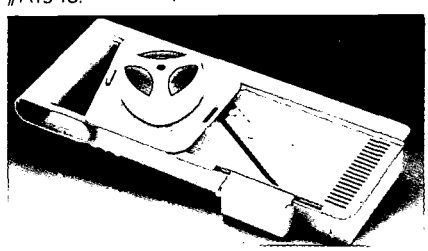

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NEAT STUFF

by Matthew J. Costello

I think the failure of *The Abyss* is worth our taking some time and thinking about.

(And if you haven't seen it, I suggest renting the upcoming CBS/Fox video release. Such noble failures come along all too infrequently.)

First, consider what it had going for it. In a summer filled with sequels and licensed genre properties, it offered the possibility of something fresh. It was to be nothing less than the personal vision of James Cameron, director of *Aliens* and *The Terminator*. Based on a story he'd been thinking about since he was seventeen, the film was going to be the underwater epic of all time, pioneering state-of-the-art technology. In fact, it would invent new technology for sound recording and masks that would become the new benchmark. More importantly, it was going to be set in one of the most exciting ecosystems on the planet, the deep rifts in the ocean floor.

If ever there was a time for a deep ocean film, it was now. The technology used by Robert Ballard in the discovery of the *Titanic* was available—the ROVs with sonar and three cameras, the deep-water submersibles, the instrument sleds. . . . Cameron probably knew this, knew that there was a great film out there, waiting to be made. I got to travel to Gaffney, South Carolina, where Cameron was filming *The Abyss*. The cast, going through the last days of a grueling five-month-long production period, was weary. People were packing up, damned eager to leave the deep South and the Bob's Big Boy that was their only source of entertainment.

And I saw that—on a technical level—*The Abyss* was going to be spectacular.

Some months later, the producer, Cameron's ex-wife Gale Ann Hurd, arranged a showing of fifteen minutes of the film at New York's premiere show palace, The Ziegfeld. The sequence—showing the dogfight/chase between the crazed Navy SEAL Michael Biehn and Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio—was as exciting as you could want. The clip that followed, involving a drowning and attempted resuscitation, made my hair stand on end.

But the release date of the film kept getting changed. Plans for small screenings were canceled, to be replaced by a mammoth, celebrity-filled one-night stand at the

(Continued on page 147)

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VIEWPOINT

I REMEMBER CLARION

by Damon Knight

art: Laura Lakey

Damon Knight, the well-known and distinguished author and editor, has taught the art of writing science fiction at the Clarion Workshop for over twenty years. We are pleased to showcase here his fascinating reminiscence on some of his experiences there.

Q: Why is the Clarion Workshop so called?

A.: I'm glad you asked.

To begin with, you have to understand that Clarion, PA, is the sphincter of the universe. It is in the middle of a blank space on the map of northwestern Pennsylvania. The town has no reason for being there except for Clarion University, formerly Clarion State College, and before that Clarion Teachers' College, which the inhabitants accordingly hate.

By pure dumb luck, Clarion State College was the institution that hired Robin Scott Wilson as

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VIEWPOINT

an English teacher in 1967. Robin, who had published about a dozen stories in *Analog* and elsewhere as "Robin Scott," sweet-talked his dean into letting him run a summer SF workshop. Then he came to the Milford Science Fiction Writers' Conference to see how we did what we did. (Milford, PA, is in the semi-civilized eastern half of the state, and at that time Judith Merril, James Blish, Virginia Kidd, and I were all living there.)

Okay. Now get this picture: Robin Scott Wilson, a muscular military-looking man who had let it be known that he was just out of the CIA, hung around at the Milford Conference watching and listening intently for eight days, making everybody extremely nervous, before he revealed what he was there for. He intended to combine our round-robin workshop system with a little lecturing and turn it into a six-week training course for SF writers. In Clarion, PA.

Robin's plans were made and he had picked his instructors: Judy Merril, Fritz Leiber, Harlan Ellison, Kate Wilhelm, and me. We all said yes and trotted out to the sphincter of the universe in July and August.

Robin ran the sessions with a firm hand; he did most of the teaching, and the "visiting lecturers" (us) were invited to comment afterward. It was just as well, because he was a teacher and we weren't. Kate and I were veterans of many Milfords, but we had never had to teach elementary things like point of view, or plot. On the last goddamn day of the six-week course, a student asked what a plot was.

"I thought a plot was just a bunch of interesting things happening," he said.

I was so unprepared that all I could do was mumble about the Scott Meredith plot skeleton. Every year something like this happened, and then Kate and I would have to go home and figure out how to teach plot, or point of view, or whatever.*

Even so, with Robin's firm

*The weird thing is that every time we succeed in teaching something, it stays taught—the next year's students already know it. Figure that out.

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guidance, we managed to teach something somehow. We did an exercise one morning that involved three students reading their own dialog. One of them, Vonda McIntyre, had written a line that went, "The motherfuckers'll swim up your ass." She discovered she couldn't say it; it came out "motherfuckles." A new diminutive! Up against the curb, motherfuckles!

Another time, Glen Cook had turned in one of his Tolkienesque adventures full of characters named Eilmeric Delgenshavn and Woldeimar Häggletoath. One of the other students complained, "I don't dig all these unpronounceable names." His name was Wieslaw Zbigniew Czyzewski, and he looked up bewildered at the roar of laughter.

The students were a mixed lot that year and for several years after: about half were people interested in becoming science fiction or fantasy writers, and the rest creative writing students who thought a science fiction workshop might be fun. Even so,

"In the hotel dining room downtown, studying the menu, Kate asked what the stuffed crab was stuffed with. 'I don't know,' the waitress replied, 'but I wouldn't eat it.' "

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right from the start, being at Clarion was like living in a dynamo. Adrenaline was squirting; the students wrote all night, went to class at eight, read manuscripts and pursued an active social life in the afternoon, and then started all over again. Mind you, Milford was like that and always had been, but that was eight days and this was six *weeks*.

Our biggest problem was diet: there were no restaurants serving edible food within a thirty-mile radius of Clarion. I know, because we tried them all.

We began with the college cafeteria, which was truly incredible. You would think that nobody could ruin, for example, a *toasted cheese sandwich*.

In the hotel dining room downtown, studying the menu, Kate asked what the stuffed crab was stuffed with. "I don't know," the waitress replied, "but *I* wouldn't eat it."

In another restaurant the waiter brought me a gibson made with sweet vermouth; in still another, it was the onion that was sweet. Around then I began to suspect we had strayed into a time warp. Later, on the way home, we stopped for lunch in a little town whose name I don't remember, and it was 1935. The sugar in big glass shakers with chrome tops, the Wurlitzer jukebox with a little control unit at every table, the counterman's sleeve garters, the huge menu on the wall—even the *prices* were 1935. They didn't know. They had lost touch thirty years ago, and nobody had told them.

That first year, some of the town boys threw one of our students down on the sidewalk and *cut his hair*. Can you imagine, in 1968? They just didn't know; they hadn't found out.

There was one movie theater in town; it showed the same film all summer. When the students got tired of the film, they stood in a row on the curb and peered at the drivers of passing cars. They stooped for Volkswagens.

My own contribution was superballs. I bought ten a day and we lost them. Eventually we saturated the shrubbery around Becht Hall, and whenever we

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went looking for one lost ball we found another.

The college had a Foucault pendulum that didn't work, and the planetarium was slowly collapsing into a coal seam. Becht Hall, where the students and teachers were housed for the first two years, was condemned, and for good reason—big cracks up and down the outside walls—but was still in use as a dorm, probably because it was roomier, pleasanter, and more fit for human occupancy than the new dorms of brick and aluminum. It was segregated by sex, however, and when our two-year-old son Jonathan wanted to go upstairs to ride his tricycle, he learned to shout, "Man on the floor!"

I remember the sun on the old stucco walls, and the girls with their piano legs lumping past, and the seven-foot thistles that grew near the front door of Becht, and the rubber tree in back—bare branches festooned with used condoms. Life was simple there. We got up from our spartan cots in the morning, cooked breakfast on a hot plate, took Jonathan to the babysitter, went to class.

"... That was the year Gardner Dozois came to visit ... Suddenly one afternoon there was a procession marching down the hill.... A slender virgin carried aloft, arms crossed over her slacks..."

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VIEWPOINT

Then lunch, and a fat stack of Xeroxed manuscripts to read. In the afternoon we had individual conferences with the students, a practice we have continued ever since. Then cheese, pretzels, and beer to fortify me for dinner in the cafeteria. In the evening, a little grab-assing on the porch—Frisbees, water balloons.

Running concurrently with the Clarion Workshop was an archaeological summer course taught by a German autocrat in riding breeches and boots. The diggers used to come over to Becht and fraternize when their dusty day was over, and one day the professor came too. He looked with interest at one of our students, a very large Native American named Russell Bates, and asked him what tribe he belonged to. "Kiowa," said Russell. The professor took Russell's chin in his hand and turned him to look at the profile. "Hm, you *could* be," he said, and offered to show Russell his collection of authentic Indian skulls.

In the third year, because the president of the college lived next door and was tired of the sound of typewriters all night long, Kate and I were allowed to remain in Becht, but the students were moved to Given Hall, a new dorm. Horror! Cinderblock interior walls! Sleeping cubicles ten by six! Rubber mattresses on wheels that skidded across the floor and dumped people out, banging their faces into the electrical outlets scabbed on the walls! Windows filled with aluminum louvers—doors locked at night! Help, help!

That was the year when Gardner Dozois came to visit and lived in the dorm with the students, teaching them to make people piles on beds. Suddenly one afternoon there was a procession marching down the hill. Robes, beads, headdresses. A solemn chant, "*Yo* . . . ho! . . . *Yo* . . . ho!" A slender virgin carried aloft, arms crossed over her slacks. A whisper from one of the bearers, a short fellow: "I'm carrying the whole ass!" They laid her down carefully on the sidewalk in front of Becht. She struggled a little when Gardner put a candle

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upright in her crotch. Then he flourished a table knife and haggled at her tummy with it (a copout, it should have been her heart, but then she would have really struggled), and the thing was done. Robin Wilson got there just too late, but we told him all. He was especially interested to learn that the college president had been standing on his balcony next door, smoking a pipe and watching. "Did she really have a candle in her thingy?" he asked. Kate said yes, but added kindly that it wasn't lit. "Whew!" said Robin.

After the third year Robin left for a series of better jobs, culminating in the presidency of Chico State College in Chico, CA.* That left the Clarion Workshop in limbo, but Robin managed to find somebody who would sponsor it for one year at Tulane. The academic sponsor was a figurehead; the acting director was James Sallis, a young writer who had attended several sessions of the Milford Conference. That year was a shambles in certain respects; the students included a number of warm bodies who stayed in the dorm reading underground comix and never came to class; the French Quarter was a constantly available distraction, and there were other problems too distressing to remember. Even so, we had a few winners, including Gustav Hasford, the author of *The Short-Timers*.

Still devoted to the Workshop, Robin scurried around during the next year and found two teachers who were willing to take it on at Michigan State University, where it has remained to this day: R. Glenn Wright and Leonard N. Isaacs. Glenn, who died in 1986, was an English professor; Lenny was a molecular biologist. They were both interested in science fiction and had taught courses together. Gradually they drew other MSU professors into their orbit, and now there are seven or

*A few years ago, James McClintock, one of the Clarion academic sponsors at Michigan State University, spent a year teaching in China. There, on a train, he met a teacher from Clarion College who had a bottle of beer in one hand and a bag of peanuts in the other. As long as he had his beer and peanuts, he said, he was all right. McClintock asked if he knew Robin Wilson. "Oh, Robin Wilson!" wailed the man. *"He got out!"*

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VIEWPOINT

eight who take turns. Katie and I have fallen in love with every one.

Does Clarion work? Yes. Why does it work? Nobody knows. The six-week period is arbitrary, and so are other features, but we are afraid to tinker with them because we don't know what essential element we might pluck out. We know some things that don't work—visiting lecturers who are indifferent to the students, or who lie to them, or who are on ego trips, for instance. The mix and sequence of visiting lecturers probably has something to do with the success of Clarion, but we don't know how to analyze that or predict it. Every year we take a risk with each new lecturer and every new student. Somehow, it all works.

During the last two decades Clarion students have grown a little more mature, more career-oriented and perhaps a tad more conventional in their behavior. In the early days we had a preponderance of adolescent males; then the age and sex ratio shifted. In 1987, for some reason, the adolescent males were back, and it was a great group just the same. What we see, regardless of age or sex, is talent, intelligence, determination, and dedication. Clarion students, unlike some others, are eager to learn. They willingly endure the psychic pressure, the hot dorms, the terrible food, and they come out better writers.

A lot of marriages have been made and broken at Clarion. One year not so long ago, two handsome students of opposite sexes met in the lobby of the dorm on their first day. They looked at each other: "Clarion?" "Clarion?" As I was told the story, they then leaped toward each other and more or less copulated in midair.

MiniClarions have budded in many places, including Chicago, Los Angeles, Boca Raton, Florida, and Turkey City, Texas. Clarionites are huddling here and there, and *they are breeding*. The second generation is well on its way. ●

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CLARION AND CLARION WEST ANNOUNCE 1990 WRITERS' WORKSHOPS

CLARION:

This annual six-week workshop in science fiction and fantasy writing, an outgrowth of the Milford Conference of professional writers, has been sponsored by Michigan State University's Lyman Briggs School since 1972. Admission is limited to twenty-five short story writers. The 1990 staff includes **Damon Knight, Kate Wilhelm, James Patrick Kelly, Joyce Thompson, Connie Willis,** and **Michael Kube-McDowell.**

This year's course will be held from June 24 through August 4. Admission to the workshop is based on the submission of writing samples of two complete short stories between ten and twenty-five pages long, a completed application form, and a $25 application fee. Application deadline is April 16, 1990. Fees for the Workshop will be approximately $1,225 for Michigan residents and $1,925 for non-Michigan residents. This fee includes four semester credits, single room housing, and some meals. Limited scholarship money, based on merit and/or financial need, is available.

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Rob Chilson's stories have appeared in Analog
several times since 1977. His most recent
novel, his first for young readers,
Deep Dimensional Voyage, was published by Atheneum
Gerda & the Wizard is Rob's first
full-length novel. He lives in Maryland
with his wife and two children.
Mr. Chilson's latest novel, Wet Like Rain
was published last March by Warner Books Publishers.

GERDA AND THE WIZARD

by Rob Chilson

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The sound of horses and men's voices took her man Hugh out of the house quickly; belatedly Gerda heard the jingle of rich harness. Then they were all dismounting out front. She dithered for a moment between going out to help Hugh and staying in to greet them when they entered. Before she could decide, they were entering the dark, smoky house.

Wealthy men in colorful rich clothes, all seeming younger than she, even the one with gray hair. All tall, sturdy, active, healthy, strong in a different way than she and Hugh were strong. Gerda and Hugh were peasants, strong like oxen; these nobles were strong the way a panther is strong. Gerda counted eight. Three were knights, three esquires, and two servants. Hugh was leading their stamping horses around the house to the mean, fly-filled shed they used as a barn.

Gerda bobbed a curtsy that had a touch of fear in it; never had noble-born been within their dwelling. "May I be of service, Noble Sirs?"

Two of them were openly holding their noses; the rest sniffed disdainfully. They clustered near the feeble light from the door, where the lingering light of the setting sun entered reluctantly. Behind Gerda the fire was not half so bright. After a moment spent looking around, they had located the obvious hazards to movement; except near the door, there were scarcely more than paths between pieces of rude furniture.

"We shall abide here this night, old woman," said one of the esquires crisply, the knights being too noble to condescend.

They looked at her, though, again with disdain, and Gerda was glad that she was no longer young—and that Maken was married and gone, aye and Ealdgyth, young though she was.

"We are honored," she said, curtsying again. "My man hight Hugh; I am called Gerda."

There was a snort from one of the servants and the esquire spoke loftily: "You entertain the noble Baron Hildimar, Sir Gwilliam of the High Tower, Sir Harold Strong of Stanes, and their noble esquires."

The servants weren't mentioned, and the esquires not named. Gerda curtsyed a third time, saying, "How may we serve you?"

"Perhaps, My Lord, we should save our provender? If so be the carles have anything fit for betters than dogs to eat," said the gray-haired one to one of the middle-aged men.

This handsome fellow was apparently the baron, not the older man as she had thought.

"How say you?" said the esquire to her. "What meat have you to offer us?"

Gerda hesitated a moment. It was a lean time. Of course such as these would not dream of eating the pease porridge simmering quietly behind her. "Cow's cheese and milk, my lords," she said immediately, to gain time. "Bacon." This would end the flitch, but it was old, ill-tasting. She

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thought to mention eggs, but it might be best to save them for morning. "Bread. Only rye, my lords. And ale." They'd not finish that, for Hugh had another hogshead buried in the woods.

The noble travelers looked at each other with humorous resignation. "Perhaps the cheese and bread, my lords?" said the esquire. "Washed down by strong country ale, it might save us a meal of our provisions."

There was a general nodding of heads and the third knight spoke: "Let it be so, then, Roger."

The esquire turned to her and barked: "Fetch food then, old woman, and quickly!"

Gerda jumped to obey, as the nobles sorted themselves out and found seats. Another esquire called for candles and she hastily set out her two tallow dips and gave them a brand from the fireplace. Hugh was wealthy as peasants went; there were three stools for the knights and a table big enough, though uneven. The esquires either stood behind their lords, or seated themselves on the two chests Hugh had made. The servants retreated to the straw-tick bed in the angle of the wall—she and Hugh had not slept on the floor since the birth of their first daughter.

However, it was crowded with all these people, for Hugh came from a family of quality. Cattle were never permitted in the house when he was young, and he had held to that. The house was small in consequence. The table, chests, and bed took up most of one end of it, the fireplace and the cupboard most of the other.

Gerda began by pouring ale into every vessel she had: the horn cup, so fabulously expensive she brought it out only on holidays or when her in-laws were visiting, the two blackjacks, leather cups water-proofed with tar, and the small wooden bowl from which the priest had blessed her six children. The esquires sneered and made haste to produce silvern cups for the three lords, but had to share her plebeian vessels with the servants.

Hugh entered, having bedded and fed the horses, while she was cutting bread and cheese. He made haste to kneel and ask if he could be of further service, having wit enough to keep his unclean hands from the food to be served to the nobles.

Him the knights spoke to directly, sharply inquiring as to how he had cared for their horses. But Hugh had in good times owned horses and knew the lore of their care. Satisfied on that score, they dismissed him and returned to their conversation.

They ate like famished wolves, gulping rye bread and cheese in huge chunks, but then, Gerda thought, they were big men. Hugh might perhaps weigh as much as any but the huge gray-haired fellow, whom she gathered was the famous warrior Sir Harold Strong, of Stanes. Even she

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had heard vaguely of him. But all these men, even the servants, were taller than Hugh, and none were small.

The esquires served the nobles, and Gerda stood behind to produce the food to be served. Then the esquires drew a little apart from the nobles, as those fell to drinking and talking, and ate their share. After which, the servants ate theirs in the bed corner.

Gerda remained alert to their needs, but a word to Hugh sent him out with a bowl of pease porridge and a wooden spoon, and a half loaf. He was cranky when unfed, and it was no time to have him become surly; it would be like to kill them all if the lords found cause for resentment. Tomorrow, she knew, she'd have to do a half-baking, and began to reckon up in her mind the state of her pantry. Of rye meal there was no lack, and she had sourdough, also some sour milk, and sweet. Salt, lard—perhaps enough.

Around the table they were discussing the Wizard Aelfgar. Of him Gerda had heard, though not by name. He had recently built a dwelling not far from them. His magic had at first generated much fear among the peasantry, and many feats were told of him. But he had harmed none. Babies had not begun to disappear as some had held would happen; not even young animals of any sort.

Indeed, it was said that those bold enough to offer him cut wood found a ready buyer, and also corn and other foodstuffs. Furthermore, he ground corn for any who dared present it, saving a day-long trip to the village and the Baron's mill, to which they were bound by law to bring their corn. Moreover, the Wizard ground the grain for half the Baron's price. Few, however, of the peasants in this sparsely populated corner of the land dared have anything to do with him, fearing sanctions of the nobles or the church.

And now the nobles were come to deal with him.

Listening, Gerda learned that the Wizard Aelfgar's chief crime was practicing sorcery, that being forbidden of itself. Secondly, he had threatened the structure of society and led dogs on to look above themselves. (Gerda pretended to be very busy, though Hugh had had no dealings with him.) Finally, he wickedly suborned villains away from their duties to their liege lords. All of these crimes were punishable by death, and the baron had the power of the high justice. Further, they also had a warrant from the king, and another from the church. Doubly damned, the wizard must die.

Gerda felt a pang. He had to her been nothing but a thing to speak of and wonder at, and henceforth her days would be a little darker for his death.

There was some dispute about their present location. When Hugh reentered and crouched in a corner, Sir Gwilliam of the High Tower turned

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to him and said, "You, dog, to whom do you belong? My lord Blane, or is it the Count Reddin?"

Gerda felt her heart stop. She could not say who her lord was, could think only of the name of the reeve's man: Otho. But Hugh, to her relief, spoke up, though subdued. "My lord, it is my lord the Baron Blane we owe our duties to."

Gerda did not know that, and wondered if it mattered.

"Ah, it is as I said," said the Baron Hildimar with satisfaction. "We are not yet on the Countee's lands. I should judge that Reddin's demesne begins beyond the wood we saw just ere we descended the hill."

"If so, my lord," said Sir Harold, "then I warrant ye we shall find the wizard within or on the borders of that self-same wold."

"A fair hazard," said Sir Gwilliam. " 'Tis not so large a copse we cannot search it out in a day, or at most two."

"Mayhap these cattle know aught of interest," said the baron, not turning his head.

Nor did any of them, but Roger the esquire turned to Hugh. Gerda's man had squatted silently, and as still as one tormented by lice and fleas could.

"Say, dog, do you know aught of a wizard new-come to these parts within the past year and oppressing the people thereof?" His look said plainly that he couldn't imagine any oppression lowering the populace.

Hugh rubbed his shock head nervously, said, "My lord, I had from—from a neighbor a word that—that a man had builded a rich house agin' a hill upon the northern side of—of that wood ye spoke of. What we call Culder's Wood. On the north side. A hill called Steep Knob."

"We should be there ere nightfall," said the baron when the esquire had repeated this.

"Best we get our rest now, as our mounts are doing," said Sir Harold. "We shall have need of all our strength if we are to face the wizard after a day's ride."

"My lord," spoke the esquire that had stood behind the baron. "Shall we not rather sleep without than within this foul hut? For these dogs do verily drip fleas."

"It were better we were beneath a roof," said Sir Harold the Strong promptly. The firelight gleamed on his gray hair as he turned to glance at the esquire. "For the wizard surely knows we come to slay him. If the moon or stars shine upon us, it is like he will be able to see us in his dream or perchance in a crystal."

"Then these dogs must sleep under roof also, and there is scarce room for the eight of us," said Sir Gwilliam. "Else the wizard will wonder why they sleep without."

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"Aye, but they have a barn, which perhaps also our servants might use."

But it turned out that none cared to do so, though devoted servants might have slept with the horses as a precaution. When Gerda said as much in the barn to her man, Hugh said in his short way, "They fear the wizard, though they do not admit it."

"Is the wizard dangerous?" she asked.

"Not as ever I heard tell," Hugh said. "Leastwise, not to dogs like us." The last bitterly.

Gerda found sleep difficult despite her weariness; she lay reckoning up her pantry. She hoped the two speckled hens would lay early tomorrow, but doubted they'd have done so by the time the nobles were fain to eat. The horses, too, troubled her; suppose one hurt itself in their barn? Or say horse thieves had followed them, reckoning where they might spend the night?

At length, however, she slept, to awaken well before light. Warm though the summer night had been, she was chill and stiff with lying on the pile of last year's hay. Hugh awakened despite her attempt at silence, rising at once to grope for the meal bin. Gerda left him measuring out rye meal and the black-spotted beans which tasted well enough but were too unsightly to sell. Seizing the buckets, she started for the spring.

It was over a hundred yards to the spring, down hill, but that was close as water went, and she and Hugh were lucky. Gerda's back was bent, her shoulders had been rounded from carrying water before her twentieth birthday. Her bare feet knew the path well enough, and presently she found the spring. They had rocked it around and covered it with a clumsy wooden cover to keep out animals. Even so mice and sometimes rats or squirrels got in through the overflow and drowned. Heaving the cover off, Gerda bent and plunged the buckets in, one at a time.

Filled, made of thick wood, they weighed thirty pounds apiece. Gerda straightened with one in each fist and walked with careful rapid steps back up the hill, her feet feeling the way. But she was used to doing this in the dark. At the house she fumbled the door open as quietly as she might, lest one of the noble warriors hear and spring up with sword in hand.

Inside, she saw in the faint light of the remaining coals that the one called Harold the Strong was indeed awake, watching her. Gerda made him no sign, turning to the fireplace and blowing on the coals, adding bark, until the fire began to blaze up, then piling on split wood. So soon as it was burning, she poured the water into the smaller pot and swung it over the flames.

Turning to go, she saw that the gray-haired knight was again lying with eyes closed; the others had not awakened.

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Back down the hill. Hugh had not finished feeding the horses; now he was serving them the remnants of last year's turnips and green onions. His own oxen had to wait. As she went down the path again, Gerda frowned, hoping the nobles wouldn't take the feeding of beans to their horses amiss. It would make them lively, and moreover, would probably make them fart. Still, the horses hadn't time to forage for grass, nor would it provide enough aliment if they did have the time.

This time Gerda poured the water into the water butt outside the door, and went down the hill again. Hugh was chopping wood by the light of a brand lit at the kitchen fire. By the time she had finished the third trip, it was coming on light. It was later than she had expected, and she hurried on the fourth and fifth trips. Fortunately she had not stumbled on any trip.

By the fifth trip the cock was crowing and the men stirring within the house. One of the servants had come without and was cursing the necessity of lying with fleas and other vermin. The water she had brought would have to do. Hugh had rummaged for eggs—he was no fool, was her man—and had found three. These, added to the previous store, might barely do, with the bacon.

The nobles were rising as she entered, Sir Gwilliam disgustedly prodding his esquire with his sheath to arouse him.

"Are the horses cared for?" the baron asked immediately, almost before his eyes were open.

"Aye, and well fed," said Sir Harold, entering behind Gerda so silently she started.

"Ah, then we have but to eat and ride," said the baron. Glancing at her, and away, he said, "What cheer does this hut hold?"

"There is yet more of the ale, my lord," said Sir Gwilliam. "I think too that there be more bread and cheese."

The esquire called Edwy put the question to Gerda.

"There be eggs, and bacon," said Gerda hastily—there was little enough left of bread or cheese.

"I think this porridge the peasants eat would not be a bad beginning to the day," said Sir Harold Strong. "It is after all more than mere oatmeal; that is pease porridge or I never smelt it. Perhaps some of that bacon in it will make it more palatable to warriors."

"Come, let us wash and let the beldame provide," said Baron Hildimar, stepping past her not discourteously to the fireplace. Sir Harold proffered the wooden basin he had already washed in, in cold water.

"But, eggs, my lord," said Edwy, his esquire. "How can the hinds possibly cook them, lacking pans for the purpose?"

"Boil them, sir squire, in the small pot," Gerda said immediately, and bit her lip for speaking without being spoken to.

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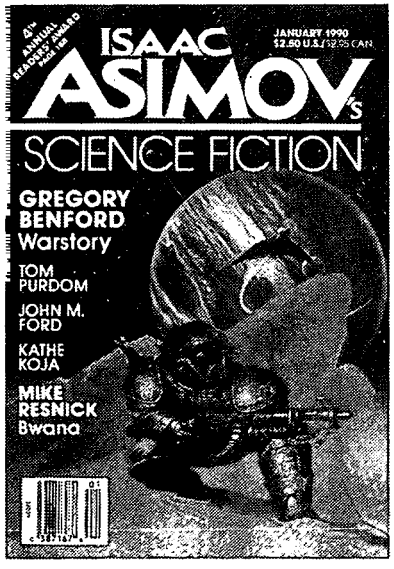

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Even in the dim light of the fire she could see the united glares of the servants and esquires. But their masters were less conventional.

"Boiled eggs sound well enough," said the baron to Sir Harold. "Hold, though—if we take the heated water with which to wash, the cooking will be delayed. Let the eggs be cooked first. I shall wash with cold water, as I perceive you have done, Sir Harold."

"It is main cold, but not too cold for a warrior, and of a pleasant taste—I ventured to drink."

"Was that wise? I trust you will not suffer a flux," said Baron Hildimar anxiously. A flux would take a warrior's strength down as fast as a wound.

"The peasant avowed he often drank it, sometimes with willow bark for flavor, and never suffered fluxion of the bowels," said Sir Harold, as they stepped outside.

Gerda turned her back on the company remaining within, to avoid further notice—she feared at least to be struck for her saucy ways. Dropping the eggs slowly into the boiling water, she listened tensely, but the baron's mild manners, and those of Sir Harold, had apparently disarmed the remaining men. That, or they were eager to breathe the purer air without. She continued at the fire, slicing the end of the rank home-cured bacon into the porridge, as they exited.

It was full light though the sun not yet up when the warriors sat them down to eat. Again they made a meal from the peasant hut, sparing their trail rations. Gerda hoped they would not pass back by this way upon their return, having slain the sorceror. She could not feed them another meal without arousing their disgust at the victuals. Even now the esquires were contemptuous of the porridge.

Sir Gwilliam High Tower and the Baron Hildimar examined the horses carefully, questioning Hugh on his care of them. They approved mightily, and it seemed, to Gerda listening from within, that they had been disappointed in the care accorded their mounts earlier. To her horror she realized that they desired to carry him with them to the wizard's house, to care for their horses and generally do what work was needful.

"But—my lord—I am—I am my lord Blane's man," Hugh stammered, standing on one foot and then the other.

"The baron is right," said Sir Harold Strong. "We need not only a sturdy man to see to our horses, but also a woman to cook for us. You have no son?"

Of the six children Gerda had borne, but three had survived, and Wat, Hugh's only son, had died when the baron Blane called up his feudal levies and rode against the bandits of Fartherlea. Hugh had never been the same man since, and now of course Gerda was too old to bear again.

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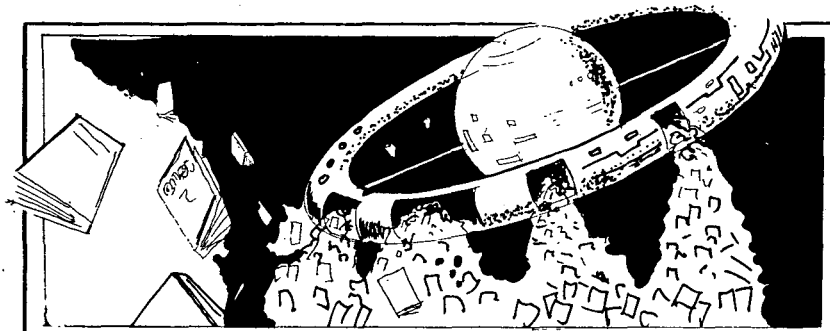

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"Then, my good man, you must come, and fetch your wife," said Baron Hildimar.

"My lord Blane—"

"We shall be pleased to pay you. A broad penny a day," said Sir Gwilliam, drawling distastefull.

Hugh was silent, calculating. He was not avaricious; neither was he fool enough to anger them. Pleasant as the men had been—if only because of her stooped age—if only because the peasants had leaped to serve them—yet Gerda knew that if they were badly crossed they were capable of firing the thatch.

"Let me throw down a mort o' feed for mine oxen, m'lords," Hugh said, and at their nod, was off.

Gerda occupied herself in readying the house for her departure, hoping they would not be gone so long the fire would go out, hoping no one came by in their absence and stole aught, hoping foxes would not destroy their few fowls.

In short order they set off, Hugh before her and Gerda following at the tail of the warriors' march. They walked their horses across lots, and Gerda saw country she had never seen before. Most of it was new to Hugh also. Over hill and dale, making east. They passed three houses whose occupants came forth and stared at them from a distance. The first was their neighbor Till Hud's son's house, and Gerda hoped his daughter Tilby would think to go down and watch her house. But she could not call out while with the lords, and so said nothing.

Presently, nearing the borders of the wood, the houses were left behind. All this was fallow land, as the war of a generation or two before had so wasted the country that it was abandoned, and the peasants had not yet spread back into it. Also, it was as she heard still disputed at law between the baron and the count.

The shadows were growing long when they came upon Steep Knob and saw the smoke going up. Chopped wood was visible here and there in Culder's Wood, and they heard the ring of axes. Presently the nobles drew rein before the most imposing house Gerda had ever seen, far more so than the blacksmith's in the village, her only standard of comparison.

Big though it was, it was obviously digged back into the hill, for windows looked out of turfy banks, and above, on the slope, stone chimneys placidly vented smoke, as if above thatch, not forest floor. The nobles murmured, for the windows were partly closed, yet one could see through them, as if through ice. Strips of gauzy cloth hung down on either side of them, and people could be seen going to and fro in rooms behind, busy as a castle.

Even as they stared, a tall, commanding figure stood in the open door.

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He was gray, with a neatly-trimmed gray beard, a mild eye, wore a soft loose robe that shimmered yellow even in the shaded doorway.

"Enter, my noble friends, and be welcome," he called.

After a moment she heard Sir Harold say, "He seems not to meditate mischief, my lord. Let us do even as he bids, and seek to learn his weaknesses."

Hugh hurried forward to gather their reins, and Gerda shifted the bag of provisions she had brought for the horses and hurried to help him. They stood puzzled for a moment when the nobles and their servants had gone, for there was no stable or other outbuilding visible. However, someone in glittering armor came out of a side door in the turfy bank of Steep Knob.

The horses began to jerk at the reins in a panicky manner and she and her man had much ado to hold them. Then Gerda saw the armored one more clearly and nearly dropped the reins, her heart hammering with fear. For this was no mortal woman who stood before them, but a thing made as if by coppersmith all of brass, in the shape of a woman.

The brazen woman said, "If you follow me, I will lead you to a place for the horses." Her voice was as mellow as a horn. Her eyes glinted in her gleaming face like the glitter of mica in certain rocks.

She turned and dumbly they followed her, staring as though their eyes would protrude. Belatedly Gerda thought shame to her for going about unclothed, but this was buried in the wonder of the working of the woman's joints. It was hard to think of her as a magical being, easy to assume she was a girl in brazen armor. But her face was brazen also, and her voice; it could not be.

The horses had to be urged into the room in the hill, and they entered shuddering and rolling their eyes. Here were more brazen women and men, who stood back and watched with glittering eyes while the horses were tied by their reins to posts. Like the women, the brazen men were nude, but like them had no sex. Gerda could not guess the purpose of the room, but it was not for horses. There was a stone-flagged floor that engaged her admiration. It was spotlessly clean, and did not even have rushes on it.

As they were tying up the horses, she became aware that every flea and louse on her body was suddenly on the move. A few breaths passed, and the vermin moved more wildly. Then one, and another, and all of them ceased to move entirely. She said nothing but looked in amaze at Hugh, who looked back big-eyed. Then he pointed mutely at a horsefly that had come in with them. It lay upside down on the floor, desperately yet weakly buzzing its wings and moving its legs. It died as they watched.

Neither spoke of it. Hugh measured out the beans and oats they had

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brought onto the floor, a sufficiency before each horse, Gerda holding the bag. Then they looked round uncertainly.

The brazen woman who first had approached them stepped forward again. "If your duties be fulfilled, then you may follow me. First you should wash, then you shall be fed."

It had been a long day, and Gerda had had but little time to eat pease porridge that morning. The thought of food did not overcome her fear of the magics of this place, but the brazen woman had spoken only kindly to them. The others had not spoken at all, even to each other. Back farther into the hill, where to their wonder great round stones gave forth light like the sun, yet no heat or smoke, they were shown to a room with troughs in the floor.

Quickly the brazen people fetched flat things woven of straw or perhaps rushes, flimsy walls they might have been, like nothing Gerda had ever heard of. These were set up around two of the troughs, Gerda and her man in separate little rooms. The brass woman in her room did things to the metalwork at the end of the trough, and water began to rush steaming into it, causing Gerda to jump.

It came upon her that she was to wash in that. With wonder, and some hesitation, she doffed her heavy linen dress and let down her graying hair. In summer it had been her custom as a girl to bathe monthly with the other girls in the river, and as a young wife she still continued the custom till she and Hugh moved from the Littledale. Now she was a sober old woman, thirty-eight and a grandmother, and washed partially from a basin from time to time. It was years since she had been in all over.

The brazen woman took her dress and handed it out to one who waited without, and Gerda regarded them with alarm, standing stiffly beside the trough. But the woman of brass said, "Fear not, it shall be returned to you when it is clean. Get you into the water, and take this."

She handed to Gerda a square of coarse cloth with a flower embroidered on it—no, woven artfully into it. "Wash yourself all over with that—its magic will get you clean in a trice."

Wonderingly Gerda did as she was bid, hearing through the screen similar words spoken to Hugh. And indeed, in moments only, the wetted cloth left her skin white where it was not browned by the sun. It even cleaned her wetted hair, and to her amazement, and partly to her disgust, Gerda saw the corpses of all the vermin that had infested her that day floating on the water. She arose cleaner than perhaps she had ever in her life been. The brazen woman did something else and all the water in the trough rushed out, carrying the dirt and dead vermin away.

Her dress had been returned to her, clean and smelling warm and piney. The woman of brass seated Gerda on a stool and brushed out her

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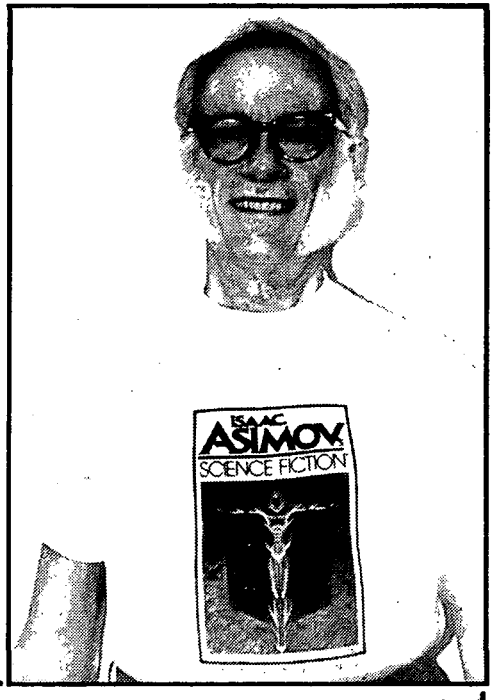

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hair with a brush that, in moments, left it untangled and faintly scented. Then she braided it properly and put it back up on Gerda's head. Gerda submitted dumbly, thinking that nothing could amaze her more than this service.

When she went looking for Hugh, however, she found that a brazen young man had just finished trimming his hair and beard. Her man now looked like a short, broad-shouldered nobleman; even his skin looked soft after his bath, like a noble knight's. From his mute look she must have seemed as strange to him.

The brazen woman led them into a nearby room and urged them to be seated at a small table. "Food will be served directly," she said.

"Oh, no," said Gerda. "W-we are b-but peasants—"

"Your masters are even now finishing their baths and will soon be served with our master in the main dining room. Their servants will be served in the smaller dining room. Here, you will be served."

"B-but it is not meet—" Gerda could not continue: a brazen man was carrying in a wooden platter on which were two bowls and bread.

They were served clear yellow soup that smelled of chicken. The good meat smell of it started Gerda's stomach, and she hesitated only a moment more. In each bowl—of fine earthenware with a blue flower painted in it—was a spoon made of some metal as shiny and bright as silver, but by the look and feel, not silver. They ate abashedly, Hugh after a few trials abandoning the spoon and dipping the bread—white bread, not rye or black—into the broth. Finished, Gerda still felt hungry, but it had been very good.

Then the man of brass brought in another platter with two tranchoirs of earthenware, each with a smoking steak on it. Gerda was horrified; the metal ones had become confused and were serving them their masters' meal. It took some persuasion to convince her and Hugh that all was well. They ate the steaks, and a pie was brought in. It was filled with meat and gravy and many vegetables, green peas and beans and turnips. They ate it too, with gusto; everything tasted so very good. And with each course save the first, wine milder than their ale, though not so nourishing, was served.

"Do you require more food?" the brazen woman asked.

They signified not.

"You have bathed and fed. How else may we serve you?"

Gerda looked at Hugh. She could think of nothing. After a moment he nudged her and whispered, "Ask."

Gerda thought a moment, and said hesitantly, "Will you tell us why there are no flies or other vermin within this house?"

"Our master, the wizard Aelfgar, has devised a magick that slays all vermin of any nature that enters the dwelling."

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"Whence came the water that we bathed in? Who carried it, and how far?"

"It came from a well, below the hill. But the rest is easier to show than tell. Come."

They followed her a short distance under those wonderful glowing stones, up two flights of stairs that made them wonder again, into a room. A thing like an iron tree stump rose from the floor, from which limbs leaped sideways to pierce the walls.

"Here is the well. This mass of stone is magic, and is called an attractive. Watch." The woman of brass flipped back the lid on the stump, disclosing a shaft that dropped into darkness. She swung the "attractive" stone over the hole.

After a prolonged moment there was a gurgle from below that caused Gerda to start; standing next to Hugh's clean shirt, she felt his heart pound.

"The water is rising," said the brazen woman, and as the liquid tone altered, she said, "Now it is flowing through the side pipes into the tanks. These are huge cauldrons from which water may be let down into the rooms below."

"But the water was warm," Gerda said, awed. "Is there a fire beneath these cauldrons?"

"Nay. There is a great fire in the center of this dwelling, and in it are all manner of magicks. There are firestones in it, and so long as these small stones be within the fire, then the greater firestones shall be hot, and give off heat. The water is poured over these stones in its course to the bathing troughs, and other uses."

Gerda could think of nothing more to say. Awed, she reached out and touched gently the stony attractive. Hugh nudged her and murmured, "No horses?"

Clearing her throat, Gerda said, "Do you have no horses?"

"Nay, we automatons do what work is needful, and be strong as any horse. Neither need we eat nor sleep, and so require no food or bedding."

"How then do you live?" Gerda asked faintly. Hugh's whole life was spent in getting food, shelter, and clothing for himself and her.

"We do not live, any more than does a waterwheel."

The brazen woman conducted them back to the horses, where Hugh nervously assured himself they were doing well. Indeed, they were now as calm as if raised among brazen people. But they had scattered their feed so, they had not eaten a third of it, and were trying to lick it up from the clean flags like cattle.

"We need buckets or troughs," he whispered to Gerda, vainly trying to rake piles of feed together.

Hesitantly she said so to the brazen people, and immediately sturdy

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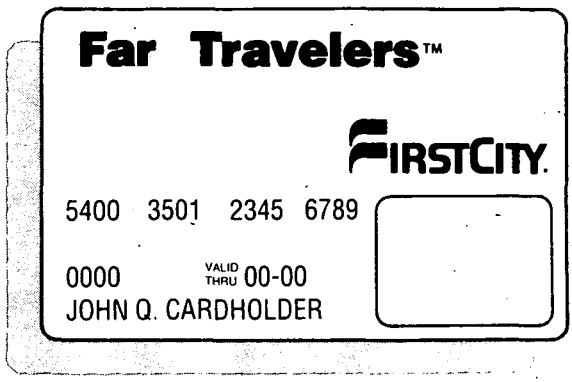
The Shape of Things to Come



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wooden buckets were brought. The horses ate contentedly while Hugh and Gerda rubbed them, loosening the saddles to work under them.

Presently a brazen woman stepped forward to say, "Your masters will require their horses very soon."

Quickly Hugh went round, tightening their cinches, punching one horse in the belly, while Gerda removed the buckets. Ready, they led the horses out by the door they had entered, took them to the shade of the trees, and waited for some little time, while flies again attacked the stamping horses.

Presently the warriors began to exit from the house under Steep Knob, the knights and baron lingering to bid their host farewell. Crossing to the horses they mounted swiftly and walked them along a path out of sight of the house in the wold. Then they halted and all drew near Sir Harold the Strong.

"How say you, Sir Harold? Can we overthrow him? I had no idea he was so mighty a wizard," said the baron.

"I think it may be done, my lord," said Sir Harold confidently. "From what I saw, the chiefest of his magick derives from that great fire we saw at the center of his hall. Remember that cauldron with the complicated engine within, its parts turning like a waterwheel? What said he of it?"

"That it gave animation to his automatons."

"Indeed. Whiles that fire burns and that cauldron bubbles, then so long shall the brazen beings move. But should it be stifled, then so shall they. And I make no doubt that they are the chiefest defense of the wizard's house."

"A mighty defense, indeed," said Sir Gwilliam, subdued. "Men or women, these brazen people are of the doughtiest sort that ever I saw. For they tire not, neither can they be wounded, to be weakened by loss of blood. How might we battle through them to douse this fire?"

"That should not be necessary, as I shall show," said Sir Harold. "That fire is the one whose smoke vents from the central chimney, upon the hill. Needs only to have water poured down upon it to douse it effectually."

There was a general chorus of understanding and approbation. "Will you then rede us your plan, Sir Harold?" the baron asked. "For you are by far the most experienced in war of us here, and have also dealt with sorcerers."

"None like to this. All of you give thought to what we do, for it is by no means likely that the automatons are the whole of Aelfgar's magicks," said Sir Harold. "Hesitate not to make suggestions."

The plan, as it shaped, was that the warriors should stand in three groups, the baron and his esquire on the right, Sir Gwilliam and his

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esquire on the left, Sir Harold, his esquire, and the two servants in the middle.

"For the servants have some knowledge of arms, though they be not well practised," he said. "Whereas this dog-peasant is a better horse-handler than they, at any day. He then shall stand among the trees with our horses. The old woman shall carry water up the hill and pour it down upon the fire. So soon as the smoke ceases to rise, or we see the automatons cease to move, we shall all raise a shout and storm the house."

This sounded good to them all, but it was the esquire Roger of all people who spoke the thought that was in Gerda's mind: "How shall the old woman carry water, lacking buckets? Must we borrow them of Aelfgar?"

Sir Harold glared at him, but the baron said, "She shall use the leathern horse-buckets in my saddlebags." He reached back and took from his bags a pair of leather buckets that collapsed like hosen when not full of water. "They are for carrying dry stuffs, but will hold water well enough."

"Good!" said Sir Gwilliam. "I saw a spring upon the farther slope of the hill as we approached the house. Let us forth, then!"

When the party had halted, Gerda was given the buckets and she and Hugh went wordlessly to find the spring. He was as gloomy as she over being involved in nobles' battles. Perhaps he was thinking, as she was, that this was how their son Wat died. Gerda filled the buckets and paused, looking at him. Hugh stood looking solemnly back, looking noble and handsome despite his gnarled age, in his cleanliness. Gerda felt quite an old peasant woman beside him.

For a moment she remembered him like this, when young, and remembered the ardency of their yearning for each other. She had not remembered that for ages; the old wild yearning was gone, replaced by a stolid content and reliance. Now she felt a touch of it again. But she did not know what to say.

And in the end, there was nothing to say.

They nodded to each other, and she turned to trudge up the slope of Steep Knob. Behind her, she heard nothing for several seconds, then Hugh turned and plodded back to the waiting warriors.

The climb was three times her usual water carry, and as she toiled panting up the hill, Gerda remembered the attractive. A pity she had not that now. A pity she had no such thing at home. That, she supposed, would be for nobles only, if ever it escaped the wizards. Yet—

Gerda had spent her whole life carrying water. Her daughters, not yet twenty, were already beginning to be bent and hunched from carrying water. Her granddaughters—they were born straight, as her daughters had been. But that would not last, for they too would spend their lives carrying water. And now Gerda knew it was not necessary.

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Atop the hill, she readily identified the chief chimney that Sir Harold had spoken of. She paused to rest, the leather strings of the buckets cutting into her palms. The chimney was a little taller than she, and she was puzzled how to climb it. Finally Gerda hung one bucket on a limb and scrambled up on the chimney with the other bucket in one hand.

White wood smoke poured easily, calmly, from it. Gerda, panting, thought of the fireplace below, of the magical heart of the brazen woman beating swiftly in boiling water, of the woman's calm, kindly voice, of the dying vermin on her skin, of the kindly way the wizard, who never saw her or knew her, had had her entreated.

Spilling the water, flinging the bucket away, Gerda lifted herself over the chimney. Catching a breath of pure air, she put her face over the smokehole and cried, "Halloooo! Halloooo! Bewaaaare! Bewaaaare! Bewaaaare!"

Then she leaped down from the chimney, panting, red-faced, smoke in her hair, and ran to the other bucket, which also she emptied. For good measure she threw both buckets down the fireplace, then hurried down the further side of the hill.

Gerda could think of nothing to do but go home.

They caught her in late dusk, four tired and wounded men on three horses. One of the horses fell even as they shouted at her. Gerda made no effort to flee further, stood facing them apathetically. Sir Harold the Strong, of Stanes, was not with them. Perhaps well for her; then she realized it did not matter.

Baron Hildimar and Sir Gwilliam had survived, as had Edwy the esquire and one of the servants. Hugh was not with them, and Gerda experienced a pang. But that, too, did not matter.

For the first time a noble spoke to her directly.

"Bitch! Betrayer!" they shouted, cuffing her. "Why did you betray us?"

At length they calmed themselves. Sir Gwilliam said to the baron, "My lord, we should waste no time on her. Let us slay her and be on our way. Pommers hath died, and is not like to be the last horse we will lose, while the wizard may yet be hard upon our trail."

"I shall not dirty my steel with the dog's blood of her," snapped the baron.

"Nay, nor I; nor is such a death meet for a dog. Rather she should be burned at the stake for having holpen the wizard—"

"Nay, there be no time to gather faggots."

"Nor have we a rope, wherewith to hang her. Let her be given to the servants to be beaten," said Sir Gwilliam.

"Aye. But let it be quick."

Edwy and the other servant approached her, dropping the bags they had gathered from the fallen horse. Edwy undid his belt, the servant

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picked up a half-rotten limb, and they fell hastily upon her, striking and kicking as Gerda fell.

Gerda hunched upon the forest floor under an oak and readied herself for death. The blows fell thickly and fast; she heard the whistling breath of the frightened and exhausted servant. She made a distance between herself and the pain, thinking of Hugh. She hoped he had not thought unkindly of her as he died.

The beating ended before unconsciousness came. Fear of pursuit, exhaustion, defeat, worked on her oppressors. She heard the horses make off, followed by the stumbling men. Gerda continued to lie there, dully conscious of pain, thinking of her house. She hoped they would not fire it as they passed by. Flagstones for the floor, then an attractive for the water, but she could not see how the upcoming water could be guided up the footpath.

Footsteps approached, and for a moment she feared it was the nobles returning, or perhaps Sir Harold following the baron. Then came the hope it might be Hugh, impossible as that could be. With an effort that brought forth screams of pain from her back and ribs, she raised and turned her head.

A brass face bent above hers. For a moment she thought it was the woman who had served them; then she saw that it was a brazen man. He turned his head and in his deep bronze voice called, "Here she be!"

Kneeling, he gathered her up while Gerda bit back groans. "My master, the wizard Aelfgar, but wishes to know one thing, good woman. Why did you warn us of enemies without?"

He was a sparkling face limned against black-green oak leaves in the night. Even as she looked, the sparkles separated, pulsed, coalesced, separated again. Never before had she been called a good woman. She knew then that she had not guessed wrong about the wizard. Gerda croaked, "For my granddaughters."

Then the darkness took her. ●

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The Dragon in the Garden

by Sandra Lindow

Having put the last load
Of permanent press in the dryer,
She went out to water the flowers
Before her children had to be fed,
And found
An enormous, batwinged dragon
Snoring beneath the Chinese elm,
Hot breath scorching
A ten-foot circle of lawn
Around a face
Malevolent even in sleep.

As the screendoor clicked behind her,
The dragon opened
One jeweled and arrogant eye
And intoned,
"Prepare for your demise; I
Intend to have you for breakfast."

Fetid smoke curled
From each cup-sized nostril
As if an entire convention
Of cigar-smoking salesmen
Had convened within.
"Unlikely," she said,
"I have too much to do
To waste my time on you."

As the dragon postured,
Sizzled and fumed
Like a grease fire in the oven,
She turned on the garden hose

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And aimed it down his grinning throat,
Swiftly quenching the fire inside.
Then with a forearm strengthened and quickened
From years of housework and racquet ball,
She cracked him
On the end of his vulnerable chin
With the nozzle of the hose,
Thus driving the broken jaw bone
Into his misanthropic brain—

"No harder really
Than swatting a mosquito," she thought,
"And certainly a larger target."
The dragon
Fell dead on the spot,
A perplexed expression on his face,
And she watered the flowers around him
Until it was time to fix the children's breakfast
And watch an hour of Donahue.

The Dragon in the Garden (Denouement)

Because the dragon
Was too big for the dumpster,
She and the children
Buried him under the vegetable garden,
There where her Blue Ribbon tomatoes
Grow fat and succulent and sweet
With only the faintest taste
Of something tantalizingly different,
Something like the memory of summer camp
And nights around a crackling fire.

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After we killed the guard, Glaucon and I ran down the corridor away from the Well. Glaucon had been seriously aged in the fight. He limped and cursed, a piece of dying meat and he knew it. I brushed my hand along the wall looking for a door.

"We'll make it," I said.

"Sure," he said. He held his arm against his side.

We ran past a series of ontological windows: a forest fire, a sun in space, a factory refashioning children into flowers. I worried that the corridor might be a loop. For all I knew the sole purpose of such corridors was to confuse and recapture escapees. Or maybe the corridors were just for fun. The Relativists delight in such absurdities.

More windows: a snowstorm, a cloudy seascape, a corridor exactly like the one we were in, in which two men wearing yellow robes—prison kosodes like ours—searched for a way out. Glaucon stopped. The hand of his double reached out to meet his. The face of mine stared at me angrily; a strong face, an intelligent one. "It's just a mirror," I said.

"Mirror?"

"A mirror," a voice said. Protagoras appeared ahead of us in the corridor. "Like sex, it reproduces human beings."

An old joke, and typical of Protagoras to quote it without attribution.

Glaucon raised his clock. In the face of Protagoras's infinite mutability it was less than useless: there was no way Glaucon would even get a shot off. My spirit sank as I watched the change come over him. Protagoras dripped fellowship. Glaucon liked him. Nobody but a maniac could dislike Protagoras.

It took all my will to block the endorphin assault, but Glaucon was never as strong as I. A lot of talk about brotherhood had passed between us, but if I'd had my freedom I would have crisped him on the spot. Instead I hid myself from Protagoras' blue eyes, as cold as chips of aquamarine in a mosaic.

"Where are you going?" Protagoras said.

"We were going—" Glaucon started.

"—nowhere," I said.

"A hard place to get to," said Protagoras.

Glaucon's head bobbed like a dog's.

"I know a short way," Protagoras said. "Come along with me."

"Sure," said Glaucon.

I struggled to maintain control. If you had asked him, Protagoras would have denied controlling anyone: "The Superior Man rules by humility." Another sophistry.

We turned back down the corridor. If I stayed with them until we got to the center, there would be no way I could escape. Desperation forced me to test the reality of one of the windows. As we passed the ocean

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scene I pushed Glaucon into Protagoras and threw my shoulder against the glass. The window shattered; I was falling. My kosode flapped like the melting wings of Icarus as sky and sea whirled around me, and I hit the water. My breath exploded from me. I flailed and tumbled. At last I found the surface. I sputtered and gasped, my right arm in agony; my ribs ached. I kicked off my slippers and leaned onto my back. The waves rolled me up and down. The sky was low and dark. At the top of each swell I could see to the storm-clouded horizon, flat as a psychotic's affect—but in the other direction was a beach.

I swam. The bad shoulder and the kosode made it hard, but at that moment I would not have traded places with Glaucon for all the enlightenment of the ancients.

When they sent me to the penal colony they told me, "Prisons ought to be places where people are lodged only temporarily, as guests are. They must not become dwelling places."

Their idea of temporary is not mine. Temporary doesn't mean long enough for your skin to crack like the dry lakebed outside your window, for the memory of your lover's touch to recede until it's only a torment in your dreams, as distant as the mountains that surround the penal colony. These distinctions are lost on Relativists, as are all distinctions. Which, I suppose, is why I was sent there.

They keep you alone, mostly. I didn't mind the isolation—it gave me time to understand exactly how many ways I had been betrayed. I spent hours thinking of Areté, etching her ideal features in my mind. I remembered how they'd ripped me away from her. I wondered if she still lived, and if I would ever see her again. Eventually, when memory had faded, I conquered the passage of time itself: I reconstructed her image from incorruptible ideas and planned the revenge I would take once I was free again, so that the past and the future became more real to me than the endless, featureless present. Such is the power of idea over reality. To the guards I must have looked properly meditative. Inside I burned.

Each day at dawn we would be awakened by the rapping of sticks on our iron bedsteads. In the first hour we drew water from the Well of Changes. In the second we were encouraged to drink (I refused). In the third we washed floors with the water. From the fourth through the seventh we performed every other function that was necessary to maintain the prison. In the eighth we were tortured. At the ninth we were fed. At night, exhausted, we slept.

The torture chamber is made of ribbed concrete. It is a cold room, without windows. In its center is a chair, and beside the chair a small table, and on the table the hood. The hood is black and appears to be

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made of ordinary fabric, but it is not. The first time I held it, despite the evidence of my eyes I thought it had slipped through my fingers. The hood is not a material object: you cannot feel it, and it has no texture, and although it absorbs all light it is neither warm nor cold.

Your inquisitor invites you to sit in the chair and slip the hood over your head. You do so. He speaks to you. The room disappears. Your body melts away and you are made into something else. You are an animal. You are one of the ancients. You are a stone, a drop of rain in a storm, a planet. You are in another time and place. This may sound intriguing, and the first twenty times it is. But it never ends. The sessions are indiscriminate. They are deliberately pointless. They continue to the verge of insanity.

I recall one of these sessions, in which I lived in an ancient city and worked a hopeless routine in a store called the "World of Values." The values we sold were merchandise. I married, had children, grew old, lost my health and spirit. I worked forty years. Some days were happy, others sad; most were neither. The last thing I remembered was lying in a hospital bed, unable to see, dying, and hearing my wife talk with my son about what they should have for dinner. When I came out from under the hood Protagoras yanked me from the chair and told me this poem:

> Out from the nostrils of the Great Buddha
> Flew a pair of nesting swallows.

I could still hear my phantom wife's cracking voice. I was in no mood for riddles. "Tell me what it means."

"Drink from the Well and I'll tell you."

I turned my back on him.

It was always like that. Protagoras had made a career out of tormenting me. I had known him for too many years. He put faith in nothing, was totally without honor, yet he had power. His intellect was available for any use. He wasted years on banalities. He would argue any side of a case, not because he sought advantage, but because he did not care about right or wrong. He was intolerably lucky. Irresponsible as a child. Inconstant as the wind. His opaque blue gaze could be as witless as a scientist's.

And he had been my first teacher. He had introduced me to Areté, offered me useless advice throughout our stormy relationship, given ambiguous testimony at my trial, and upon the verdict abandoned the university in order to come to the prison and become my inquisitor. The thought that I had once idolized him tormented me more than any session under the hood.

After my plunge through the window into the sea, I fought my way

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through the surf to the beach. For an unknown time I lay gasping on the wet sand. When I opened my eyes I saw a flock of gulls had waddled up to me. An arm's length away the lead gull, a great bull whose ragged feathers stood out from his neck in a ruff, watched me with beady black eyes. Others, of various sizes and markings, stood in a wedge behind him. I raised my head; the gulls retreated a few steps, still holding formation. I understood immediately that they were ranked according to their stations in the flock. Thus does nature shadow forth fundamental truth: the rule of the strong over the weak, the relation of one to the many in hierarchical order.

Off to the side stood a single scrawny gull, quicker than the rest, but separate, aloof. I supposed him to be a gullish philosopher. I saluted him, my brother.

A sandpiper scuttled along the edge of the surf. Dipping a handful of seawater, I washed sand and pieces of shell from my cheek. Up the slope, sawgrass and sea oats held the dunes against the tides. The scene was familiar. With wonder and some disquiet I understood that the window had dumped me into the Great Water quite near the Imperial City.

I stumbled up the sand to the crest of the dunes. In the east, beneath piled thunderheads, lightning flashed over the dark water. To the west, against the sunset's glare, the sand and scrub turned into fields. I started inland. Night fell swiftly. From behind me came clouds, strong winds, then rain. I trudged on, singing into the downpour. The thunder sang back. Water streamed down the creases of my face, the wet kosode weighed on my chest and shoulders, the rough grass cut my feet. In the profound darkness I could continue only by memorizing the landscape revealed by flashes of lightning. Exhilarated, I hurried toward my lover. I shouted at the raindrops, any one of which might be one of my fellow prisoners under the hood. "I'm free!" I told them. I forded the swollen River of Indifference. I stumbled through Iron Tree Forest. Throughout the night I put one foot before the other, and some hours before dawn, in a melancholy drizzle, passed through the Heron's Gate into the city.

In the Processor's Quarter I found a doorway whose overhang kept out the worst of the rain. Above hung the illuminated sign of the Rat. In the corner of this doorway, under this sign, I slept.

I was awakened by the arrival of the owner of the communications shop in whose doorway I had slept.

"I am looking for the old fox," I said. "Do you know where I can find him?"

"Who are you?"

"You may call me the little fox."

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He pushed open the door. "Well, Mr. Fox, I can put you in touch with him instantly. Just step into one of our booths."

He must have known I had no money. "I don't want to communicate. I want to see him."

"Communication is much better," the shopowner said. He took a towel, a copper basin and an ornamental blade from the cupboard beneath his terminal. "No chance of physical violence. No distress other than psychological. Completely accurate reproduction. Sensory enhancement: olfactory, visual, auditory." He opened a cage set into the wall and seized a docile black rat by the scruff of the neck. "Recordability. Access to a network of supporting information services. For slight additional charge we offer intelligence augmentation and instant semiotic analysis. We make the short man tall. Physical presence has nothing to compare."

"I want to speak with him in private."

Not looking at me, he took the rat to the stone block. "We are bonded."

"I don't question your integrity."

"You have religious prejudices against communication? You are a Traveler?"

He would not rest until he forced me to admit I was penniless. I refrained from noting that, if he was such a devout communicator, he could easily have stayed home. Yet he had walked to his shop in person. Swallowing my rage, I said, "I have no money."

He sliced the rat's neck open. The animal made no sound.

After he had drained the blood and put the carcass into the display case, he washed his hands and turned to me. He seemed quite pleased with himself. He took a small object from a drawer. "He is to be found at the University. Here is a map of the maze." He slipped it into my hand.

For this act of gratuitous charity, I vowed that one day I would have revenge. I left.

The streets were crowded. Dusty gold light filtered down between the ranks of ancient buildings. Too short to use the moving ways, I walked. Orange-robed messengers threaded their way through the crowd. Sweating drivers in loincloths pulled pedicabs; I imagined the perfumed lottery winners who reclined behind the opaqued glass of their passenger compartments. In the Medical Quarter, streetside surgeons hawked their services in front of racks of breasts and penises of prodigious size. As before, the names of the streets changed hourly to mark the progress of the sun across the sky. All streets but one, and I held my breath when I came to it: the Way of Enlightenment, which ran between the Reform Temple and the Imperial Palace. As before, metamorphs entertained the faithful on the stage outside the Temple. One of them changed shape as I watched, from a dog-faced man wearing the leather skirt of an athlete

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to a tattooed CEO in powered suit. "Come drink from the Well of Changes!" he called ecstatically to passersby. "Be Reformed!"

The Well he spoke of is both literal and symbolic. The prison Well was its brother; the preachers of the Temple claim that all the Wells are one Well. Its water has the power to transform both body and mind. A scientist could tell you how it is done: viruses, brain chemistry, hypnosis, some insane combination of the three. But that is all a scientist could tell you. Unlike a scientist, I could tell you why its use is morally wrong. I could explain that some truths are eternal and ought to be held inviolate, and why a culture that accepts change indiscriminately is rotten at its heart. I could demonstrate, with inescapable logic, that reason is better than emotion. That spirit is greater than flesh. That Relativism is the road to hell.

Instead of relief at being home, I felt distress. The street's muddle upset me, but it was not simply that: the city was exactly as I had left it. The wet morning that dawned on me in the doorway might have been the morning after I was sent away. My absence had made no discernible difference. The tyranny of the Relativists that I and my friends had struggled against had not culminated in the universal misery we had predicted. Though everything changed minute to minute, it remained the same. The one thing that ought to remain constant, Truth, was to them as chimerical as the gene-changers of the Temple.

They might have done better, had they had teachers to tell them good from bad.

Looking down the boulevard, in the distance, at the heart of the city, I could see the walls of the palace. By midday I had reached it. Vendors of spiced cakes pushed their carts among the petitioners gathered beneath the great red lacquered doors. One, whose cakes each contained a free password, did a superior business. That the passwords were patent frauds was evident by the fact that the gatekeeper ignored those petitioners who tried using them. But that did not hurt sales. Most of the petitioners were halflings, and a dimwitted rabbit could best them in a deal.

I wept for my people, their ignorance and illogic. I discovered that I was clutching the map in my fist so tightly that the point of it had pierced my skin. I turned from the palace and walked away, and did not feel any relief until I saw the towers of the university rising above Scholars' Park. I remembered my first sight of them, a young boy down from the hills, the smell of cattle still about me, come to study under the great Protagoras. The meticulously kept park, the calm proportions of the buildings, spoke to the soul of that innocent boy: Here you'll be safe from blood and passion. Here you can lose yourself in the world of the mind.

The years had worn the polish off that dream, but I can't say that,

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seeing it now, once more a fugitive from a dangerous world, I did not feel some of the same joy. I thought of my father, a loutish farmer who would whip me for reading; of my gentle mother, brutalized by him, trying to keep the flame of truth alive in her boy.

On the quadrangle I approached a young woman wearing the topknot and scarlet robe of a humanist. Her head bounced to some inner rhythm, and as I imagined she was pursuing some notion of the Ideal, my heart went out to her. I was about to ask her what she studied when I saw the pin in her temple. She was listening to transtemporal music: her mind eaten by puerile improvisations played on signals picked up from the death agonies of the cosmos. Generations of researchers had devoted their lives to uncovering these secrets, only to have their efforts used by "artists" to erode people's connections with reality. I spat on the walk at her feet; she passed by, oblivious.

At the entrance to the Humanities maze I turned on the map and followed it into the gloom. Fifteen minutes later it guided me into the Department of Philosophy. It was the last place I expected to find the fox—the nest of our enemies, the place we had plotted against tirelessly. The secretary greeted me pleasantly.

"I'm looking for a man named Socrates," I said. "Some call him 'the old fox.' "

"Universe of Discourse 3," she said.

I walked down the hall, wishing I had Glaucon's clock. The door to the hall stood open. In the center of the cavelike room, in a massive support chair, sat Socrates. At last I had found a significant change: he was grossly obese. The ferretlike features I remembered were folded in fat. Only the acute eyes remained. I was profoundly shaken. As I approached, his eyes followed me.

"Socrates."

"Blume."

"What happened to you?"

Socrates lifted his dimpled hand, as if to wave away a triviality. "I won."

"You used to revile this place."

"I reviled its usurpers. Now I run it."

"You run it?"

"I'm the dean."

I should have known Socrates had turned against our cause, and perhaps at some level I had. If he had remained true he would have ended up in a cell next to mine. "You used to be a great teacher," I said.

"Right. Let me tell what happens when a man starts claiming he's a great teacher. First he starts wearing a brocade robe. Then he puts lifts

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in his sandals. The next thing you know the department's got a nasty paternity suit on its hands."

His senile chuckle was like the bubbling of water in an opium pipe.

"How did you get to be dean?"

"I performed a service for the Emperor."

"You sold out!"

"Blume the dagger," he said. Some of the old anger shaded his voice. "So sharp. So rigid. You always were a prig."

"And you used to have principles."

"Ah, principles," he said. "I'll tell you what happened to my principles. You heard about Philomena the Bandit?"

"No. I've been somewhat out of touch."

Socrates ignored the jab. "It was after you left. Philomena invaded the system, established her camp on the moon, and made her living raiding the empire. The city was at her mercy. I saw my opportunity. I announced that I would reform her. My students outfitted a small ship, and Areté and I launched for the moon."

"Areté!"

"We landed in a lush valley near the camp. Areté negotiated an audience for me. I went, alone. I described to Philomena the advantages of politic behavior. The nature of truth. The costs of living in the world of shadows and the glory of moving into the world of light. How, if she should turn to Good, her story would be told for generations. Her fame would spread throughout the world and her honor outlast her lifetime by a thousand years.

"Philomena listened. When I was finished she drew a knife and asked me, 'How long is a thousand years?' "

"Her men stood all around, waiting for me to slip. I started to speak, but before I could she pulled me close and pushed the blade against my throat.

" 'A thousand years,' Philomena said, 'is shorter than the exposure of a neutrino passing through a world. How long is life?' "

"I was petrified. She smiled. 'Life,' she said, 'is shorter than this blade.'

"I begged for mercy. She threw me out. I ran to the ship, in fear for my life. Areté asked what happened: I said nothing. We set sail for home.

"We landed amid great tumult. I first thought it was riot but soon found it celebration. During our voyage back Philomena had left the moon. People assumed I had convinced her. The Emperor spoke. Our enemies in philosophy were shortened, and the regents stretched me into dean.

"Since then," Socrates said, "I have had trouble with principles."

"You're a coward," I said.

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Despite the mask of suet, I could read the ruefulness in Socrates' eyes. "You don't know me," he said.

"What happened to Areté?"

"I have not seen her since."

"Where is she?"

"She's not here." He shifted his bulk, watching the screen that encircled the room. "Turn yourself in, Blume. If they catch you, it will only go harder."

"Where is she?"

"Even if you could get to her, she won't want to see you."

I seized his arm, twisted. "Where is Areté!"

Socrates inhaled sharply. "In the palace," he said.

"She's a prisoner?"

"She's the Empress."

That night I took a place among the halflings outside the palace gate. Men and women regrown from seed after their deaths, imprinted with stored files of their original personalities, all of them had lost resolution, for no identity file could encapsulate human complexity. Some could not speak, others displayed features too stiff to pass for human, and still others had no personalities at all. Their only chance for wholeness was to petition the Empress to perform a transfinite extrapolation from their core data. To be miraculously transformed.

An athlete beside me showed me his endorsements. An actress showed me her notices. A banker showed me his lapels. They asked me my profession. "I am a philosopher," I said.

They laughed. "Prove it," the actress said.

"In the well-ordered state," I told her, "there will be no place for you." To the athlete I said, "Yours is a good and noble profession." I turned to the banker, "Your work is more problematical," I said. "Unlike the actress, you fulfill a necessary function, but unlike the athlete, by accumulating wealth you are likely to gain more power than is justified by your small wisdom."

This speech was beyond them: the actress grumbled and went away. I left the two men and walked along below the battlements. Two bartizans framed the great doors, and archers strolled along the ramparts or leaned through the embrasures to spit on the petitioners. For this reason the halflings camped as far back from the walls as they might without blocking the street. The archers, as any educated man knew, were there for show: the gates were guarded only by a single gatekeeper, a monk who could open the door if bested in a battle of wits, but without whose acquiescence the door could not be budged.

He sat on his stool beside the gate, staring quietly ahead. Those who

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tried to talk to him could not tell whether they'd get a cuff on the ear or a friendly conversation. His flat, peasant's face was so devoid of intellect that it was some time before I recognized him as Protagoras.

His disguised presence could be one of his whims. Or it could be he was being punished for letting me escape; it could be that he waited for me. I felt an urge to run. But I would not duplicate Socrates's cowardice. If Protagoras recognized me he did not show it, and I resolved to get in or get caught. I was not some halfwit, and I knew him. I approached. "I wish to see the Empress," I said.

"You must wait."

"I've been waiting for years."

"That doesn't matter."

"I have no more time."

He studied me. His manner changed. "What will you pay?"

"I'll pay you a story that will make you laugh until your head aches."

He smiled. I saw that he recognized me; my stomach lurched. "I know many such stories," he said.

"Not like mine."

"Yes. I can see you are a great breeder of headaches."

Desperation drove me forward. "Listen, then: once there was a warlord who discovered that someone had stolen his most precious possession, a jewel of power. He ordered his servants to scour the fortress for strangers. In the bailey they found a beggar heading for the gate. The lord's men seized him and carried him to the well. 'The warlord's great jewel is lost,' they said to him. They thrust the beggar's head beneath the water. He struggled. They pulled him up and asked, 'Where is the jewel?'

" 'I don't know,' he said.

"They thrust him down again, longer this time. When they pulled him up he sputtered like an old engine. 'Where is the jewel?' they demanded. 'I don't know!' he replied.

"Furious at his insolence, fearful for their lives if they should rouse their lord's displeasure, the men pushed the beggar so far into the well that a bystander thought, 'He will surely drown.' The beggar kicked so hard it took three strong men to hold him. When at last they pulled him up he coughed and gasped, face purple, struggling to speak. They pounded him on the back. Finally he drew breath enough for words.

" 'I think you should get another diver,' the beggar said. 'I can't see it anywhere down there.' "

Protagoras smiled. "That's not funny."

"What?"

"Maybe for us, but not for the beggar. Or the bystander. Or the servants. The warlord probably had them shortened."

"Don't play games. What do you really think?"

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"I think of poor Glaucon. He misses you."

Then I saw that Protagoras only meant to torment me, as he had so many times before. He would answer my desperate need with feeble jokes until I wept or went mad. A fury more powerful than the sun itself swept over me, and I lost control. I fell on him, kicking, biting. The petitioners looked on in amazement. Shouts echoed from the ramparts. I didn't care. I'd forgotten everything but my rage; all I knew was that at last I had him in my hands. I scratched at his eyes, I beat his head against the pavements. Protagoras struggled to speak. I pulled him up and slammed his head against the doors. The tension went out of his muscles. Cross-legged, as if preparing to meditate, he slid to the ground. Blood glistened in the torchlight on the lacquered doors. "Now that's funny," he whispered, and died.

The weight of his body against the door pushed it ajar. It had been open all along.

No one came to arrest me. Across the inner ward, at the edge of an ornamental garden, a person stood in the darkness beneath a plane tree. Most of the lights of the palace were unlit, but radiance from the clerestory above heightened the shadows. Hesitantly I drew closer, too unsteady after my sudden fit of violence to hide. In my confusion I could think to do no more than approach the figure in the garden, who stood patiently as if in long expectation of me. From ten paces away I saw it was a woman dressed as a clown. From five I saw it was Areté.

Her laughter, like shattering crystal, startled me. "How serious you look!"

My head was full of questions. She pressed her fingers against my lips, silencing them. I embraced her. Red circles were painted on her cheeks, and she wore a crepe beard, but her skin was still smooth, her eyes bright, her perfume the same. She was not a day older.

The memory of dead Protagoras's slack mouth marred my triumph. She ducked out of my arms, laughing again. "You can't have me unless you catch me!"

"Areté!"

She darted through the trees. I ran after her. My heart was not in it, and I lost her until she paused beneath a tree, hands on knees, panting. "Come on! I'm not so hard to catch."

The weight was lifted from my heart. I dodged after her. Beneath the trees, through the hedge maze, among the night-blooming jasmine and bougainvillea, the silver moon tipping the edges of the leaves, I chased her. At last she let herself be caught; we fell together into a damp bed of ivy. I rested my head on her breast. The embroidery of her costume was rough against my cheek.

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She took my head in her hands and made me look her in the face. Her teeth were pearly white, breath sweet as the scented blossoms around us.

We kissed, through the ridiculous beard (I could smell the spirit gum she'd used to affix it), and the goal they had sought to instill in me at the penal colony was attained: my years of imprisonment vanished into the immediate moment as if they had never existed.

That kiss was the limit of our contact. I expected to spend the night with her; instead, she had a slave take me to a guest house for visiting dignitaries, where I was quartered with three minor landholders from the mountains. They were already asleep. After my day of confusion, rage, desire and fear, I lay there weary but hard awake, troubled by the sound of my own breathing. My thoughts were jumbled white noise. I had killed him. I had found her. Two of the fantasies of my imprisonment fulfilled in a single hour. Yet no peace. The murder of Protagoras would not long go unnoticed. I assumed Areté already knew but did not care. But if she was truly the Empress, why had he not been killed years before? Why had I rotted in prison under him?

I had no map for this maze and eventually fell asleep.

In the morning the slave, Pismire, brought me a wig of human hair, a green kimono, a yellow silk sash, and solid leather sandals: the clothes of a prosperous nonentity. My roommates appeared to be barely lettered country bumpkins, little better than my father, come to court seeking a judgment against a neighbor or a place for a younger child or protection from some bandit. One of them wore the colors of an inferior upland collegium; the others no colors at all.

I suspected at least one of them was Areté's spy; they might have thought me one as well. We looked enough alike to be brothers.

We ate in a dining room attended by machines. I spent the day studying the public rooms of the palace, hoping to get some information. At the tolling of sixth hour Pismire found me in the vivarium. He handed me a message under the Imperial seal, and left. I turned it on.

"You are invited to an important meeting," the message said.

"With whom?" I asked. "For what purpose?"

The message ignored me. "The meeting begins promptly at ninth hour. Prepare yourself." There followed directions to the place.

When I arrived the appointed room was empty. A long oak table, walls lined with racks of document spindles. At the far end French doors gave onto a balcony overlooking an ancient city of glass and metal buildings. I could hear the faint sounds of traffic below.

A side door opened and a woman in the blue suit of the Lawyer entered, followed by a clerk. The woman's glossy black hair was stranded with

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gray, but her face was smooth. She wore no makeup. She stood at the end of the table, back to the French doors, and set down a leather box. The clerk sat at her right hand. I realized that this forbidding figure was Areté. She had become as mutable as Protagoras.

"Be seated," she said. "We are here to take your deposition."

"Deposition?"

"Your statement on the matter at hand."

"What matter?"

"Your escape from the penal colony. Your murder of the gatekeeper, the honored philosopher Protagoras."

The injustice of this burned through my dismay. "Not murder. Self-defense. Or better still, euthanasia."

"Don't quibble with us. We are deprived of his presence."

"Grow a duplicate. Bring him back to life."

For reply she merely stared at me across the table. The air tasted stale, and I felt a bead of sweat run down my breast beneath my robe. "Is this some game?"

"You may well wish it a game."

"Areté!"

"I am not Areté. I am a Lawyer." She leaned toward me. "Why were you sent to prison?"

"You were with me! You know."

"We are taking your version of events for the record."

"You know as well as I that I was imprisoned for seeking the truth."

"Which truth?"

There was only one. "The one that people don't want to hear," I said.

"You had access to a truth people did not acknowledge?"

"They are blinded by custom and self-interest."

"You were not?"

"I had, through years of self-abnegation and study, risen above them. I had broken free of the chains of prejudice, climbed out of the cave of shadows that society lives in, and looked at the sun direct."

The clerk smirked as I made this speech. It was the first expression he'd shown.

"And you were blinded by it," Areté said.

"I saw the truth. But when I came back they said I was blind. They would not listen, so they put me away."

"The trial record says that you assisted in the corruption of youth."

"I was a teacher."

"The record says you refused to listen to your opponents."

"I refuse to listen to ignorance and illogic. I refuse to submit to fools, liars, and those who let passion overcome reason."

"You have never been fooled?"

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"I was, but not now."
"You never lie?"
"If I do, I still know the difference between a lie and the truth."
"You never act out of passion?"
"Only when supported by reason."
"You never suspect your own motives?"
"I know my motives."
"How?"
"I examine myself. Honestly, critically. I apply reason."
"Spare me your colossal arrogance, your revolting self-pity. Eyewitnesses say you killed the gatekeeper in a fit of rage."
"I had reason. Do you presume to understand my motives better than I? Do you understand your own?"
"No. But that's because I am dishonest. And totally arbitrary." She opened the box and took out a clock. Without hesitation she pointed it at the clerk. His smugness punctured, he stumbled back, overturning his chair. She pressed the trigger. The weapon must have been set for maximum entropy: before my eyes the clerk aged ten, twenty, fifty years. He died and rotted. In less than a minute he was a heap of bones and gruel on the floor.
"You've been in prison so long you've invented a harmless version of me," Areté said. "I am capable of anything." She laid the clock on the table, turned and opened the doors to let in a fresh night breeze. Then she climbed onto the table and crawled toward me. I sat frozen. "I am the Destroyer," she said, loosening her tie as she approached. Her eyes were fixed on mine. When she reached me she pushed me over backwards, falling atop me. "I am the force that drives the blood through your dying body, the nightmare that wakes you sweating in the middle of the night. I am the fiery cauldron within whose heat you are reduced to a vapor, extended from the visible into the invisible, dissipated on the winds of time, of fading memory, of inevitable human loss. In the face of me, you are incapable of articulate speech. About me you understand nothing."
She wound the tie around my neck, drew it tight. "Remember that," she said, strangling me.

I passed out on the floor of the interview room and awoke the next morning in a bed in a private chamber. Pismire was drawing the curtains on a view of an ocean beach: half asleep I watched the tiny figure of a man materialize in a spray of glass, in mid-air, and fall precipitously into the sea.
Pismire brought me a breakfast of fruit and spiced coffee. Touching the bruises on my neck, I watched the man resurface in the sea and swim ashore. He collapsed on the sand. A flock of gulls came to stand by his

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head. If I broke through this window, I could warn him. I could say: Socrates is fat. Watch out for the gatekeeper. Areté is alive, but she is changed.

But what could I tell him for certain? Had Areté turned Relativist, like Socrates? Was she free, or being made to play a part? Did she intend to prosecute me for the murder of Protagoras? But if so, why not simply return me to the penal colony?

I did not break through the window, and the man eventually moved up the beach toward the city.

That day servants followed me everywhere. Minor lords asked my opinions. Evidently I was a taller man than I had been the day before. I drew Pismire aside and asked him what rumors were current. He was a stocky fellow with a topknot of coarse black hair and shaved temples, silent, but when I pressed him he opened up readily enough. He said he knew for a fact that Protagoras had set himself up to be killed. He said the Emperor was dead and the Empress was the focus of a perpetual struggle. That many men had sought to make Areté theirs, but none had so far succeeded. That disaster would surely follow any man's success.

"Does she always change semblance from day to day?"

He said he had never noticed any changes.

In mid-afternoon, at precisely the same time I had yesterday received the summons to the deposition, a footman with the face of a frog handed me an invitation to dine with the Empress that evening.

Three female expediters prepared a scented bath for me; a fourth laid out a kimono of blue crepe embroidered with gold fishing nets. The mirror they held before me showed a man with wary eyes. At the tolling of ninth hour I was escorted to the banquet hall. The room was filled with notables in every finery. A large, low table stretched across the tesselated floor, surrounded by cushions. Before each place was an enamel bowl and in the center of the table was a large, three-legged brass cauldron. Areté, looking no more than twenty, stood talking to an extremely handsome man near the head of the table.

"I thank you for your courtesy," I told her.

The man watched me impassively. "No more than is your due," Areté replied. She wore a bright costume of synthetics with pleated shoulders and elbows. She looked like a toy. Her face was painted into a hard mask.

She introduced me to the man, whose name was Meno. I drew her away from him. "You frightened me last night," I said. "I thought you had forgotten me."

Only her soft brown eyes showed she wasn't a pleasure surrogate. "What makes you think I remember?"

"You could not forget and still be the one I love."

"That's probably true. I'm not sure I'm worth such devotion."

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Meno watched us from a few paces away. I turned my back to him and leaned closer to her. "I can't believe you mean that," I said quickly. "I think you say such things because you have been imprisoned by liars and self-aggrandizers. But I am here for you now. I am an objective voice. Just give me a sign, and I will set you free."

Before she could answer, a bell sounded and the people took their places. Areté guided me to a place beside her. She sat, and we all followed suit.

The slaves stood ready to serve, waiting for Areté's command. She looked around the table. "We are met here to eat together," she said. "To dine on ambrosia, because there has been strife in the city, and ambition, and treachery. But now it is going to stop."

Meno now looked openly angry. Others were worried.

"You are the favored ones," said Areté. She turned to me. "And our friend here, the little fox, is the most favored of all. Destiny's author—our new and most trusted advisor."

Several people started to protest. I seized the opportunity given by their shock. "Am I indeed your advisor?"

"You may test it by deeds."

"You and you—" I beckoned to the guards. "Clear these people from the room."

The guests were in turmoil. Meno tried to speak to Areté, but I stepped between them. The guards came forward and forced the men and women to leave. After they were gone I had the guards and slaves leave as well. The doors closed and the hall was silent. I turned. Areté had watched it all calmly, sitting crosslegged at the head of the table.

"Now, Areté, you must listen to me. Your commands have been twisted throughout this city. You and I have an instinctive sympathy. You must let me determine who sees you. I will interpret your words. The world is not ready to understand without an interpreter; they need to be educated."

"And you are the teacher."

"I am suited to it by temperament and training."

She smiled meekly.

I told Areté that I was hungry. She rose and prepared a bowl of soup from the cauldron. I sat at the head of the table. She came and set the bowl before me, then kneeled and touched her forehead to the floor.

"Feed me," I said.

She took the bowl and a napkin. She blew on the ambrosia to cool it, lips pursed. Like a serving girl, she held the bowl to my lips. Areté fed me all of it, like mother to child, lover to lover. It tasted better than anything I had ever eaten. It warmed my belly and inflamed my desire. When the bowl was empty I pushed it away, knocking it from her hand.

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It clattered on the marble floor. I would be put off no longer. I took her right there, amid the cushions.

She was indeed the hardest of toys.

It had taken me three days from my entrance to the palace to become Areté's lover and voice. The Emperor over the Empress. On the first day of my reign I had the shopkeeper who had insulted me whipped the length of the Way of Enlightenment. On the second I ordered that only those certified in philosophy be qualified to vote. On the third I banished the poets.

Each evening Areté fed me ambrosia from a bowl. Each night we shared the Imperial bed. Each morning I awoke calmer, in more possession of myself. I moved more slowly. The hours of the day were drained of their urgency. Areté stopped changing. Her face settled with a quiet clarity into my mind, a clarity unlike the burning image I had treasured up during my years in the prison.

On the morning of the third day I awoke fresh and happy. Areté was not there. Pismire entered the room bearing a basin, a towel, a razor, a mirror. He washed and shaved me, then held the mirror before me. For the first time I saw the lines about my eyes and mouth were fading, and realized that I was being Reformed.

I looked at Pismire. I saw him clearly: eyes cold as aquamarines.

"It's time for you to come home, Blume," he said.

No anger, no protest arose in me. No remorse. No frustration. "I've been betrayed," I said. "Some virus, some drug, some notion you've put in my head."

Protagoras smiled. "The ambrosia. Brewed with water from the Well."

Now I am back in the prison. Escape is out of the question. Every step outward would be a step backward. It's all relative.

Instead I draw water from the Well of Changes. I drink. Protagoras says whatever changes will happen to me will be a reflection of my own psyche. That my new form is not determined by the water, but by me. How do I control it, I ask. You don't, he replies.

Glaucon has become a feral dog.

Protagoras and I go for long walks across the dry lake. He seldom speaks. I am not angry. Still, I fear a relapse. I am close to being nourished, but as yet I am not sure I am capable of it. I don't understand, as I never understood, where the penal colony is. I don't understand, as I never understood, how I can live without Areté.

Protagoras sympathizes. "Can't live with her, can't live without her," he says. "She's more than just a woman, Blume. You can experience her but you can't own her."

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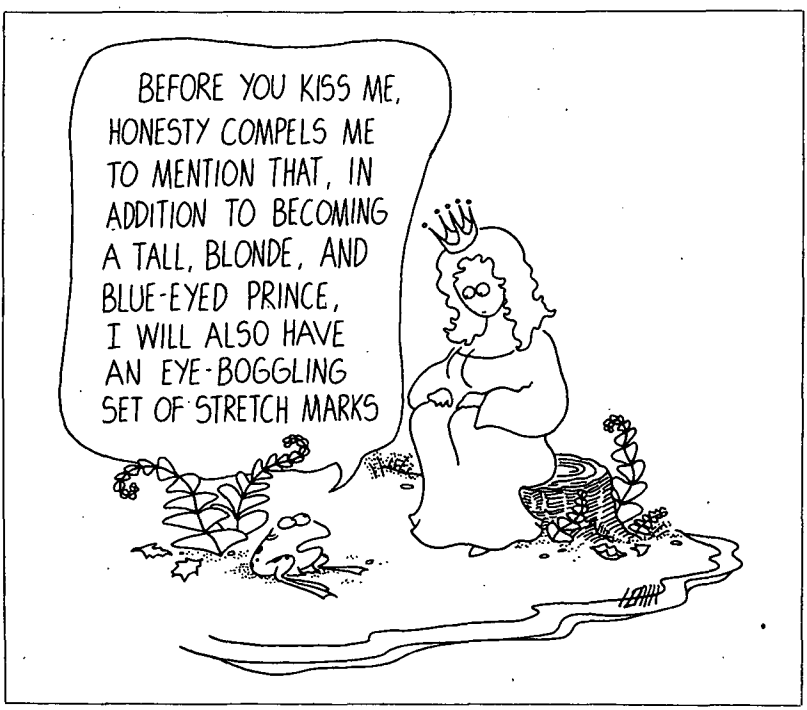
Right. When I complain about such gnomic replies Protagoras only puts me under the hood again. I think he knows some secret he wants me to guess, yet he gives no hints. I don't think that's fair.

After our most recent session, I told Protagoras my latest theory of the significance of the poem about the swallows. The poem, I told him, was an emblem of the ultimate and absolute truth of the universe. All things are determined by the ideas behind them, I said. There are three orders of existence, the Material (represented by the physical statue of the Buddha), the Spiritual (represented by its form), and the highest, which transcends both the Physical and the Spiritual, the Ideal (represented by the flight of the birds). I begged Protagoras humbly to tell me whether my analysis was true.

Protagoras said, "You are indeed an intellectual. But in order for me to reveal the answer to a question of such profound spiritual significance you must first bow down before the sacred Well."

At last I was to be enlightened. Eyes brimming with tears of hope, I turned to the Well and, with the utmost sincerity, bowed.

Then Protagoras kicked me in the ass. ●


BEFORE YOU KISS ME, HONESTY COMPELS ME TO MENTION THAT, IN ADDITION TO BECOMING A TALL, BLONDE, AND BLUE-EYED PRINCE, I WILL ALSO HAVE AN EYE-BOGGLING SET OF STRETCH MARKS

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...the aging nursing home patient, Helena Johnson, may appear to be an unlikely representative of the entire human race, she may, indeed, be an all-too-typical example of humanity....

MIDNIGHT NEWS

by Lisa Goldstein

art: Janet Aulisio

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Stevens and Gorce sat at the hotel bar, watching television. Helena Johnson's face nearly filled the entire screen. Snow drifted across her face and then covered the screen, and five or six people in the bar raised their voices. The bartender quickly switched the channel, and Helena Johnson's face came on again, shot from the same angle.

She had told the reporters she was eighty-four, but Stevens thought she looked older. Her face was covered with a soft down and her right cheek discolored with liver-colored age spots, and the white of one eye had turned as yellow as an egg yolk. The hairdressers had dyed her hair a full, rich white, but Stevens remembered from earlier interviews that it had been dull gray, and that a lot of it had fallen out.

"I lived at home for a long long time," Helena Johnson was saying in her slow scratchy voice. The reporters sat at the bar or at round tables scattered throughout the room and watched her raptly. The bar, which the hotel called a "lobby lounge," had once been elegant, but two months of continuous occupancy by the reporters had changed it into something quite different. Cigarette butts had been ground into the lush carpet, drinks had been spilled, glasses broken. "Well, it was the Depression, you know, and I couldn't move out," the old woman said. "And girls weren't supposed to live on their own back then—only loose girls lived by themselves. My father had been laid off, and I got a job as a stenographer. I was lucky to get it. I supported my family for two years, all by myself."

She stopped for a moment, unwilling or unable to go on. The camera pulled back to show her seated on the bed, then cut to the small knot of reporters standing in her hotel room. Stevens saw himself and Gorce and all the rest of them. He remembered how tense he'd been, how worried that she wouldn't call on him. One of the reporters raised his hand.

"Yes, Mr.—Mr.—" Helena Johnson said.

"Look at that," Stevens said in the bar. "She's senile, on top of everything else. How can she forget his name after two months?"

"Shhh," Gorce said.

"Capelli, ma'am," the reporter said. "I wondered how you felt while you were supporting your family. Didn't it make you feel proud?"

"Objection," Gorce said in the bar. "He's leading the witness."

"Shhh," Stevens said.

"Well, of course I was proud," Helena Johnson said. "I was putting my younger brother through college, too. He had to stop after two years, though, because I lost my job."

Her manner was poised, regal. She reminded Stevens of nothing so much as Queen Victoria. And yet she hadn't even finished grade school. "Look at her," he said in disgust. He raised his glass in a toast. "This is the woman who's going to save the world."

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* * *

No one knew how the aliens had chosen Helena Johnson. A month after they had appeared, their round ships like gold coins above the seven largest cities in the world, they had jammed radio frequencies and announced their terms for a meeting. One ship would land outside of Los Angeles, and only twenty reporters would be allowed to board.

Stevens's first surprise was that they looked human, or at least humanoid. (After the meeting scientists would speculate endlessly about androids and holograms and parallel biology.) Stevens sat on an ordinary folding chair and watched closely as the alien stepped up to the front of the room. Near him he saw reporters looking around for clues to the aliens' technology, but the room was bare except for the chairs and made of something that might have been steel.

"Good afternoon," the alien said. Its voice sounded amplified, but Stevens could see no microphone anywhere. "Hello. We are your judges. We have judged you and found you wanting. Some of us were of the opinion that you should be destroyed immediately. We have decided not to do this. We have found a representative of your species. She will make the decision. At midnight on your New Year's Eve she will tell you if you are to live or die."

No one spoke. Then a bony young woman, her thin black hair brushed back and away from her face, jumped up from her seat. It was the first time Stevens saw Gorce in person, though he had heard of her from his colleagues. He held his breath without knowing it. "Why do you feel you have the right to sit in judgment over us?" she asked. Her voice was level.

"No questions," the alien said. "We will give you the name of the woman who is to represent you. Her name is Helena Johnson. She lives in Phoenix, Arizona. And there is one more thing. Brian Capelli, will you stand please?"

Capelli stood. His face was as white as his shirt. The alien made no motion that Stevens could see, but suddenly there was a sharp noise like a backfire and Capelli's chair burst into flames. Capelli moaned a little and then seemed to realize where he was and stopped.

"We have power and we will use it," the alien said.

Not surprisingly, with every state and federal organization mobilized to look for her, Helena Johnson was found within two hours. She lived in a state-sponsored nursing home. She was asleep when the FBI agent found her and when she woke she seemed unable to answer the simplest question. "What is your name?" the agent asked. Helena Johnson gave no sign that she had heard him.

But within a month she seemed to have accepted the situation as her due. The government put her up in the best hotel in Washington and

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hired nurses, hairdressers, manicurists, companions. She had an ulcer on her leg that had never been seen to at the home, and the government sent out a highly paid specialist to treat it. Another specialist discovered that she wasn't so much disoriented as hard of hearing, and she was fitted with a hearing aid.

She granted interviews with the twenty reporters daily, then screened the tapes and deleted anything she didn't like. The world discovered to its dismay that Helena Johnson's life hadn't been an easy one, and everything possible was done to make it easier. Television programs now played for an audience of one: stations showed *The Nutcracker Suite* over and over again because she had talked about being taken to see it as a child. Newspapers stopped reporting crime and wars—crime and wars had, in fact, nearly disappeared—and ran headlines about the number of kittens adopted. She got an average of ten thousand letters a day: most of them came with a gift and about a third were marriage proposals.

"So my co-worker, Doris, she said the boss would let you stay on if you would, well, do favors for him," Helena Johnson was saying. "You know what I mean. And I decided that I'd rather starve. But then the next day I thought, well, it's not just me that's depending on the money I earn. It's my parents, and my brother who I was putting through college—did I tell you about that?—and I decided that if he asked me I'd do it. I'm not ashamed to tell you that that's what I thought." The camera cut to the reporters again. Most of them were nodding sympathetically. "So the next day I was called into his office. I was called alone, so I thought, here it comes. Usually when he fired you he called you in in a group. He was standing behind his desk—I can see it now, as clear as day—and he opened his mouth to say something. And then he shook his head, like this, and he said, 'Forget it, girl, go home. You're too ugly.' "

"I wonder if that guy's still alive," Stevens said in the bar.

"I hope for his sake he's dead."

"Gone to the grave never knowing he doomed the world with one sentence."

"She doesn't seem too bitter."

"Who knows what she seems? Who knows what she's thinking? Look at her—she looks like the cat that ate the canary. She's going to play this for all it's worth."

"I got married at the beginning of the war," Helena Johnson said. "World War Two, that was. I was thirty, a bit old for those days. My husband met one of those female soldiers over there in Europe, one of those WACs, and left me for her. Left me and our baby son."

"Is that when you went back to your maiden name?" Gorce asked.

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"Yes, and that's a very sharp question, young lady," Helena Johnson said.

"I don't see why," Stevens said, in the bar.

"Because she wants to talk about herself, that's why," Gorce said.

"My husband's name was Furnival," Helena Johnson said. "Isn't that a dreadful name? It sounds just like a funeral, that's what I always thought. I went back to my maiden name as soon as I heard about him and that WAC. They tell me he's dead now. Died in 1979. I lost track of him a long time ago."

"And then you had to raise your baby all by yourself," Gorce said.

"That's right, I did," Helena Johnson said, smiling at her. "And he left me too, soon as he could get a job. He was about seventeen. Seventeen, that's right."

"Have they found him yet?" Stevens asked in the bar.

"They traced him to that trailer camp in Florida," Gorce said. "He left last April, and they haven't been able to pick him up from there. Probably on the run."

"You'd be too."

"I don't know. This could be just what she needs, an emotional reunion with the prodigal son. Make great television."

"The prodigal son has a record as long as your arm—assault, armed robbery, breaking and entering . . ."

"Do you think the Feds will grant him that pardon?"

"Probably."

On the screen the interview was coming to an end. "Anything else you want to say, Miss Johnson?" the hired companion asked.

"No, I'm feeling a little tired," she said. "Oh, I did want to thank—what was his name? Oh, dear, I can't remember it. A young man in Texas who sent me this ring." She held the back of her hand to the camera. The diamond caught the light and sparkled. "Thank you so much."

Her face faded. "The Dance of the Sugar-Plum Fairies" came on over the credits and several people in the bar groaned loudly. The bartender turned the sound down and then turned it back up for the nightly news.

"Good evening," the anchorman said. "Our top story today concerns the daily interview with Helena Johnson. During the course of the interview Miss Johnson spoke once again about her childhood and growing up during the Depression, about her marriage and son. She had this to say about her husband."

"Good God, she's the most boring woman in the world!" Stevens said. "Why do we have to sit through this drivel again?"

"You know why," Gorce said. "In case she's watching."

"In other news, the government reported that the number of survivors of the Denver fire-bombing stands at two," the anchorman said. "Both

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the survivors are listed in stable condition. Both have burns over fifty percent of their bodies. Skin grafts are scheduled to begin tomorrow."

"God, that was stupid," Gorce said. "I wonder whose idea it was to attack that ship."

"Well, how the hell could we know? All we'd seen them do was burn a chair, and any special-effects man could have done that. What if they were just bluffing?"

"And now we know," Gorce said.

"Now we know."

"Government sources say the bombs were not nuclear weapons," the anchorman said. "There is no radioactive fall-out at all from the bombing. Miss Johnson has sent both the survivors a telegram expressing her wishes for their speedy recovery."

"Bully for her," Stevens said.

"Come off it," Gorce said. "She's not that bad."

"She's a horror. She hasn't called on me once the last three days, and you know why? It's because I accidentally called her Ms."

"I feel sorry for her. What a hard life she's had."

"Sure you do—she loves you. Look at the way she beamed at you all through the interview today. But I guess you're right. I guess she's been lonely. She was only married a year before her husband was called up."

"I didn't mean just her marriage—"

"Now don't go giving me that feminist look," Stevens said, though in fact Gorce's steady gaze hadn't changed. "You know what I meant. If they're not married they usually have a career, something they're interested in. Like you. But this woman had nothing."

"Were you ever married, Stevens?"

"No." He looked at her, surprised by the question. "Relationships don't work out for me. Too much traveling, I guess. How about you?"

"No," she said.

On the screen a scientist was summarizing the latest attempt to communicate with the ships, and then the news ended. "Stay turned for *Cinderella* following tonight's news," the announcer said over the credits.

"Cinderella!" Stevens said, disgusted. "Come on, guys. She can't be awake this late."

"Shhh."

"What—you think she'll hear me? She's on the top floor."

The bartender turned the television off. Stevens and Gorce ordered another round. "You know what I was thinking?" Gorce said. "Have you thought about these aliens? I mean really thought about them?"

"Sure," Stevens said. "Like everyone else in America. I've got a new theory, too. I bet it's a test."

"A what?"

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"A test. It doesn't matter what the old bitch chooses, whether she wants us destroyed or not. It's like a laboratory experiment. They're watching us to see how we act under pressure. It we do okay, if we don't all go nuts, we'll be asked to join some kind of galactic federation."

She said nothing for a while. The dim light in the bar made her face look sallow, darkened the hollows under her eyes. "You ever read comic books when you were a kid, Stevens?"

"Huh? No."

"That's what it always turned out to be in the comic books. Some kind of test. All these weird things would happen—the super-hero might even die—but in the end everything returned to normal. Because the kids reading the comics never liked it when things changed too much. The only explanation the writers could come up with was that it had all been a test. But I don't think these tests happen outside of comic books."

"Okay, so what's your theory?"

"Well, think about what's happening here. These guys have set themselves up as the final law, judge, jury, and executioner all rolled into one. Sure, they picked the old woman, but that's just the point—*they* picked her. They probably know how she's going to vote, or they have a good idea. What kind of people would do something like that?"

"I don't know."

"Pretty sadistic people, I'd say. If there was some kind of galactic federation, wouldn't they just observe us and contact us when we were ready? I mean, we were on our way to blowing ourselves up without any outside help at all. Maybe these people travel around the galaxy getting their jollies from watching helpless races cower for months before someone makes the final decision. These aliens are probably outlaws, some kind of renegades. They're so immoral no galactic federation would have them."

"That's a cheerful thought."

Gorce looked around. "Hey, where's Nichols?"

"I don't know. He said something this morning—"

"What?"

"He was going to try to talk to her alone."

"He can't do that."

"You're damn right he can't. Look at all the security they've got posted around her."

"No, I mean he can't get a story the rest of us don't have. We've got to go up there."

"Forget it."

"Come on. We can stop by for a visit or something. Play a game of cards. She'll be happy to see us."

"You're crazy."

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"All right, you stay here. I'm going up and talk to her. She won't mind—she likes me."

"Gorce—"

Gorce stood up. "Gorce, don't do that! For God's sake—*Melissa!*"

He wouldn't have remembered her first name if they hadn't done interviews with each other for their respective news stations. "This is Melissa Gorce, reporting from Washington," she'd said, and he'd thought that he couldn't have come up with a name less like her. Using it seemed to work. She stopped, and the mad light in her eyes went out. "Okay," she said. "Maybe you're right."

The next day, at the daily interview, Stevens found out how right he'd been. The number of FBI guards at the door had been doubled, and when his ID had been checked and he'd finally been let in he saw that Nichols was gone.

"He tried to get inside her room last night," Capelli said. "The guards said they were reaching for their guns when they saw this bright flash of light go off. He was practically unrecognizable—they had to check his dental records to make sure it was him."

"He'd been Denverized," another reporter said, trying to laugh.

"He wanted to commit suicide, you ask me," Capelli said. His hands were shaking.

"You see?" Stevens couldn't resist saying to Gorce. "You see what I mean?"

The two cameramen finished setting up, and Helena Johnson's companion opened the floor to questions. No one brought up the dead reporter and Helena Johnson didn't mention him; maybe, Stevens thought, she didn't know. To Stevens's relief she called on him for the first time in four days.

"I was wondering," he said, "how you spend your time. What are your hobbies?"

She smiled at him almost flirtatiously. He was surprised at how much hatred he felt for her at that moment. "Oh, I keep busy," she said. "I look through my mail, though of course I don't have time to answer all my correspondence. And I watch some television, I watch videotapes people send me, I have my hair done . . . I enjoy mealtimes especially, though there's a lot of food my stomach can't take. Do you know, I'd never eaten lobster in my life until last week."

Gorce was right, he thought. She does like talking about herself. If they survived New Year's Eve he'd have to keep in contact with Gorce—she was one smart woman.

Someone asked Helena Johnson a question about her father, and the old woman droned on. She's already told us this story, Stevens thought.

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There were a few more questions, and then Gorce raised her hand. Helena Johnson smiled at her. "Yes, dear?"

"What do you think of the aliens, Miss Johnson?"

"Gorce!" Capelli whispered behind her. The other reporters thought he'd lost his nerve at the first press conference, when his chair had burst into flames behind him.

"I suppose I'm grateful to them," Helena Johnson said. "If it wasn't for them I'd still be in that dreadful old age home."

"But what do you think of the way they've interfered with us? Of the way they want to make our decisions for us?"

Capelli wasn't the only reporter who became visibly nervous at this question. Stevens felt he could have cheerfully strangled her.

"I don't know, dear. You mean they want to tell us what to do?"

"They want to tell you what to do. They want to force you to make a choice."

"Oh, I don't mind making the choice. In fact—"

Oh, Lord, Stevens thought. She's going to tell us right now.

The companion stepped forward. "Our hour with Miss Johnson is almost up," she said smoothly. "Do you have anything else you want to say, Miss Johnson?"

"Yes, I do," the old woman said. "I wanted to say— Oh, dear, I've forgotten."

The companion moved to the desk and brought her a slip of paper. "Oh yes, that's right," Helena Johnson said, looking at it. "I wanted to tell everyone not to get me a Christmas present. I know a lot of people have been worrying about what to get me, and I just want to tell them I have everything I need."

So give a contribution to charity instead, Stevens thought, but Helena Johnson seemed to have finished. Did she neglect to mention charity because she knew there would be no charities, or anything else, in a few weeks? It was amazing how paranoid they had all become, how they analyzed her slightest gesture.

The companion ushered everyone out of the room. The reporters went downstairs to stand in front of the hotel and tape a short summary of the interview for their stations. Upstairs, Stevens knew, Helena Johnson and the cameramen were going over the footage, editing out parts where she thought she looked too old, too vulnerable or too uncertain.

He felt depressed by the interview, by Nichols's death. The old lady hadn't given them any hope at all this time. What would he be doing a few weeks from now? If she said no, he could probably have his pick of assignments. But if she said yes he'd be charred bones and ashes, like poor Nichols, like all the people in Denver. God, what a horrible way to die. She had to say no, she had to.

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* * *

On New Year's Eve everyone was either watching television, getting drunk or doing both at once. The last show would be broadcast live. Stevens had taken a sedative for the final interview, and he knew he wasn't the only one. There had been no commercials on any network for the last five hours; if the old lady said no, Stevens had heard, there would be commercials every three minutes.

They were let into the room for the last time at exactly midnight. "Hello," Helena Johnson said, smiling at all of them. The smell of fear was very strong.

"I have been chosen by the aliens to decide Earth's future," she said. "I don't understand why I was chosen, and neither does anyone else. But I have taken the responsibility very seriously, and I feel I have been conscientious in doing my duty."

Get on with it, Stevens thought. Yes or no.

"I have to say I have enjoyed my stay here at the hotel," she said. "But it is impossible not to think that all of you must consider me very stupid indeed." Oh, God, Stevens thought. Here it comes. The old lady's revenge. "I know very well that none of you were interested in me, in Helena Hope Johnson. If the aliens hadn't chosen me I would probably be at the nursing home right now, if not dead of neglect. My leg would be in constant pain, and the nurses would think I was senile because I couldn't hear the questions they asked me.

"So, at first, I thought I would say yes. I would say that Earth deserves to be destroyed, that its people are cruel and selfish and will only show kindness if there's something in it for them. And sometimes not even then. Why do you think my son hasn't come to visit me?" The yellow eye had filled with tears.

Oh, shit, Stevens thought. I knew it would come to this. He had heard her son was dead, killed in a bar fight.

"But then I remembered what this young lady had said," Helena Johnson said. "Miss Gorce. She asked me what I thought about the aliens interfering with our lives, with my life. Well, I thought about it, and I didn't like what I came up with. They have no right to decide whether we will live or die, whoever they are. All my life, people have decided for me, my parents, my teachers, my bosses. But that's all over with now. My answer is—no answer. I will not give them an answer."

No one moved for a long moment. Then one of the agents stationed outside the door ran into the room. "The ships are leaving!" he said. "They're taking off!"

Suddenly everyone was cheering. Stevens hugged Gorce, hugged Capelli, hugged the FBI agent. The reporters lifted Gorce and threw her

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into the air until she yelled at them to stop. I hope the camera's getting all this, Stevens thought. It's great television.

The reporters, quieter now, came over to Helena Johnson to thank her. Stevens saw Gorce kiss the old woman carefully on the cheek. "You'd better leave now," the companion said. "She gets tired so easily."

One by one the reporters went downstairs to the bar. Helena Johnson and Gorce were left alone together. Stevens went outside and waited for Gorce near the door. He wanted to tell her she'd been right to ask that question.

Gorce seemed pleased to see him when she came out. "What'd she want to talk to you about?" he asked.

"She wanted me to ghostwrite her autobiography."

Stevens laughed. "No one would read it," he said. "We know far too much about her as it is."

"It don't matter—they've already given her a million dollar contract."

"So what'd you say?"

"Well, she offered me ten percent. What do you think I said? I said yes."

"Congratulations," he said, happy for her. Outside he heard police sirens and what sounded like firecrackers.

"Thanks," she said. "Do you want t-t-to go out somewhere and celebrate?"

He looked at her with surprise. He had never known her to stutter before. She wasn't bad-looking, he thought, but too bony, and her chin and forehead were too long. She had to have gotten her job through her mad bravery and sharp common sense, because she sure didn't look like a blow-dried TV reporter. "Sorry," he said. "I told my girlfriend I'd call her when this whole thing was over."

"You never told me you had a girlfriend."

"Yeah, well, it never came up," he said. "See you, Gorce."

She looked at him a long time. "You know, Stevens, you better start being nicer to me," she said. "What if the aliens pick me to save the world next time?" ●

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The hardest thing I ever did was leave Marincite. We lived in the part of the city called Cathedral. We had a little place, only three rooms, because my father was on disability/negligence. My mother was a fish jock, she worked the shrimp pens. My father had been an integrity engineer; when I was little, we lived in Kikusui, I can barely remember it. I remember my room was all yellow and I was always warm. My father was working on a dome with a crew and the structure failed. When you're two hundred meters under water and the integrity is breached, the ocean squishes the dome flat like a big fist. My father was suited up and working outside, otherwise he'd have died. Even so he messed up his back so he could never really walk right again. Fourteen people were killed and the company had to blame someone—it's never the fault of Marincite Corp.—so they blamed it on my father. Instead of getting full disability, he got slapped with a negligence lien. His disability barely pays his medical.

We moved and my mother dropped out of tech school and went to work. Cathedral was all right; people talk about the crime and all, but there's crime anywhere, I guess. My younger sister never lived anywhere else and she turned out okay; she got good grades and passed the compulsories at fifteen, so she's taking tracked courses to go to tech school. I'm the one who spent my first three years—my formative years—in the "better environment," and I never did pass my compulsories, so who's to say it makes any difference where you live.

I certainly wasn't going to go to tech school, not with my grades, but I didn't care. When you're a kid those things don't really matter to you and besides, I hated school. I hated Marincite, I hated my mother, I hated everything. I skitzed school all the time and stood corners with the guys. My mother screamed at me, told me I was going to get pregnant. I told her I'd never get pregnant, because if I *did*, I'd never get out of Marincite. And I was going to get out of that stupid city, and not go to Julia, either. The capital wasn't enough for me. I was going to get away from Caribe, the whole frigging country. I was never meant to live in some hole in a city so far underwater the sunlight didn't even get down. I was going to go surface, go to the U.S. and live. I had this exaggerated idea of what it would be like to live in the sun, as if it was really all that different from living in artificial light. I was a spiritual kid.

I ran away from home the first time when I was fourteen. I didn't go very far; I didn't even get out of my section, much less out of Marincite. I was upset over something my mother said and I ran out of the house. I knew this girl, Marie, she was nineteen and she had a job at the Cathedral commissary and had just gotten her own place. It was just coincidence that I happened to run into her and she said I could stay with her but to go get some things, so I went back home and had to sit

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around waiting until my mother left to work—she had night rotation on the shrimp pens—and then packed some clothes. My father asked me where I was going and I said I was spending the night with Carole (who was one of the few friends I had who my mother approved of) and that I'd already told mama, but that meant I couldn't take many clothes.

When I got to Marie's, there were a bunch of people there, drinking rum and burning on pyroxin, although I didn't know about the pyroxin. I was nervous because I didn't know most of the people and they were all older than me, so I drank a rum Baka, and it went right to my head. This guy named David sat with me and put his arm around my shoulder and told me I was cute. That was when everybody was doing their hair metallic. I'm really dark, my greats were from Haiti, and I stained my skin ebony because it's dramatic and I have the features to get away with it. My hair was straight, stained magenta at the roots, and then black and then silver. It was really striking, and it made me look older. People have always taken me for older than I am; when I was fourteen, people thought I was twenty.

He said a bunch of them were going for a walk, and I went with them. We went out to the wall and looked at the ocean all around us and above us, drinking Bakas. David had his arm around my waist and I was as drunk as I have ever been. Then we walked to an exchange and took it down to the bottom level, way under ground. We walked till we came to a place where there weren't any people around. The wall was smooth and shiny with sealer. I put my hand against it, felt how cold it was. One of the guys took out a cutter and started burning the sealer. He'd burn a line, and then one of the others would lean forward and inhale the sense. David did it. I was really scared, I'd never done anything like that before. David took a deep breath, and then his eyes rolled back in his head and he shook, spasmed with his hands jerking, and then sat down. People were laughing, a couple of guys sitting on the ground, their hands still opening and closing. The burner finished the word he was writing. He wrote *Queen*.

Nobody did anything for awhile, and then David came back and was himself again. "Ayida," he said, "you ever peeked?"

I shook my head.

"Come on, try it."

I didn't want to make him angry by not doing it. Somehow I kept feeling that if I said no, he'd just leave me here by myself with all these people I didn't know. Not that I knew *David* very well. So when the burner started again, I went up and took a whiff.

My eyes burned and I felt dizzy, and then I could still hear everybody around me, but I couldn't *see* anything. Then there were all these colors, and the pressure in my head made me feel as if I would explode. It *hurt*

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so bad. Then it was as if I burst out through the top of my head and I didn't have a body anymore. I was somewhere where it was yellow, there was a light and I was flying towards it. The light was really important, like the light people fly to when they die. Some people say that all sealer does is cause a little death, and that's what the visions are; maybe it's true. If so, dying can't be too bad. There were other people there and other things happened that I couldn't quite remember afterwards. Then I came back, and I was sitting on the ground. I felt so sick, I leaned over and threw up all the rum I'd been drinking.

Just like that, all my sickness and nervousness was gone, and I felt empty and happy, and I sat with David. It was the most wonderful feeling. I looked up at the wall, the burner had written two more words, so the whole message was *Queen of Swords*. That's my card in the tarot. I knew it *meant* something, that it was a good omen; like I said, I was a spiritual kid.

After that night, I stayed with Marie for two and a half months before I went home. I did sealer again after that night, too. For awhile I was peeking through a *lot*, but then David got real stupid, and the doctor said it was from induced seizures. It wasn't as intense for me by then anyway, I didn't get out of my body much anymore, and I started getting headaches all the time, so I quit doing it. Once in awhile, I still get headaches.

I didn't stay home much after I was fourteen. I went home after being at Marie's for awhile, but there was always *some* place to sleep, someone's couch, and I would be away from home four days out of seven. Then more. Pretty soon I would be gone for weeks at a time. When I was seventeen, I got a job working a frituras stand, selling curry, morcillia sausages, and ribs. It was a horrible job, but it was a little money.

It wasn't enough to get out of Marincite, though.

I didn't really know how I was going to do it. I had to have money, but I couldn't get a good job. I guess, deep inside, I decided I would always work in a frituras stand. The only skills I had were flash cooking—you don't have to be a genius to know how to flash heat something—counting change, and using a recyc unit. I loved to swim, but the only job I could get with a recyc was fish jock, and I wasn't going to spend the rest of *my* life out in the water in the dark and cold, watching shrimp filter feed on garbage. My mother could keep *that* shit.

Besides, with my school record, I wasn't likely to get a job with Mama Marincite. That's the real bitch about living in a company town. Marincite runs the schools, owns everybody's apartment, hires and fires almost everybody except for a few independents like old Vedesh, the Indian who runs the frituras stand. Then they pay you so little that you can't really afford to pay your rent and live, so they run you a line of credit

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with a small interest rate and give you little piddly raises that never quite catch up to the amount of money you owe.

I was making 27.40cr a week, not even enough to get my own place. I worked the frituras stand near the chute. I started work at 7:00 AM, selling coffee and sweets to the people going to work. Then I was bored from 9:00 until 11:30. At 11:30, people getting their midday break came home and we were busy until 2:00 or so, then dead until 4:00. At 7:00, I got to go home. It was a four day a week job; that's how the Indian got around the labor laws.

So there I was, standing around under those yellow lights, wearing that awful white uniform. I could never keep the grease off that uniform. I *had* to have more money. I thought about stealing from Vedesh, but he never took in more than 600cr or so, and besides, how would I get it? The only thing I got out of Vedesh was a free lunch every day. He'd have choked if he knew I was piking my lunch, but I figured for what he was paying me, he could afford to feed me.

I was starting to get really depressed: It was like I was out in black water; I didn't know which way to go, and if I headed up I'd get the bends. Like the ocean was holding me down. I really believed I'd die in Marincite. That's when I started doing pyroxin all the time. I was lit and burning by the time I got to work; everybody else would be working close to the kettle because it was warm, and I'd have my sleeves pushed up above my elbows and I was pumping cold drinks. I told people I had a high metabolism. That was when the group Solstice had *Thunderstorm* out, and everybody was looking wet. I liked the look, wet skin, wet hair, wet clothes. It took an hour and a half to get dressed in the morning, but I had my hair black like DanHe and my skin still ebony, and I wore a lot of silver. I mean, I'm not as pretty as *she* is, of course, but people said I looked a lot like her. I was going to a lot of parties. Out until four or five, pop a pyroxin, go to work.

I was seeing a guy named Macandal; he was burning a long fuse. At first I thought it was pyroxin; he was keeping me supplied. Macandal had big, big shoulders, but was lean like everybody on pyroxin is lean. I was eating all the time, anything I wanted. Macandal would take me to a restaurant, and we'd get four orders of curry and two orders of the eggs stuffed with lamb and spinach, and eat it all. Macandal was dark, like me, and he wore his hair in long, tight, wine-colored braids. Always—it was his mark. He wore red lenses, too, and nobody looked like Macandal. He was a real *maroon*, real wild. People turned to look at him after he passed by, because they were *scared*, right?

Oh, it was crazy.

But he was *not* doing pyroxin, oh no.

He came by to get me after work one evening and took me out to

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dinner. I didn't want to eat Indian food, we always ate Indian food and I worked with it all day, so I made him take me to a place where we could get Ganja stew and meat patties and coconut bread. I was bitching, eating, and waving my hands around. I had just taken a pyroxin because I was crashing off the first, and I was still in the tunnel, the second hadn't taken me out yet, so I was still mean.

Macandal caught my hand in midair and said, *"Ti Reine."*

His voice calmed me right down. He always called me little queen, Macandal was mystical, too. He hadn't even known about the *Queen of Swords* the first time he called me that. That's why I knew we were supposed to be together.

"You'll do me a favor," he said. I'd do anything for Macandal, he knew that. "Tonight, I can't go to the party, I have to meet some people. You understand."

I nodded, Macandal always had to meet people, it was part of his business. But I was disappointed.

He saw that with his red eyes; we understood each other, what can I say? It was like he always knew what I felt.

"I need you to make some business for me," he said, "but then you come by my place and wait. I'll be there and we'll have our own party."

So I went to the party and sold pyroxin and thought I was something. Big girl dressed like a pop star, selling pills. It was easy. And when I got home, Macandal took his money and skimmed me five percent, and it was more money than I had ever made. After that, I never sold another sausage. I just didn't even bother to go to work.

But that night, we had our own party. Macandal turned the heat up in the apartment, up to almost body temperature, the temperature of blood. Up topside, people can go without clothes even when it's not so warm, but down in Marincite, even the air steals from you. Upside, the pressure is so much less, and there is more carbon dioxide, and every child knows that carbon dioxide can poison you, so we have hydrogen and helium in our air. That is why topsiders talk in such deep voices. That is why only pyroxin burners wear no sleeves in Marincite, because hydrogen and helium steal heat.

But that night I could be naked. We danced together naked, and at first he looked so strange, but his bare feet were so beautiful, and then I got accustomed to him and he was so beautiful. But he wouldn't let me take pyroxin.

"Ti Reine," he said, "I have something for you, hold out your hand."

I thought it was pyroxin, and I held out my hand, palm up. He had something on a chain, and he clasped it around my wrist. A slave bracelet! I had heard of them. But I didn't move, even though my heart was beating

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so fast, if I had taken pyroxin it would have burst. He positioned the contact. The bracelet was so tight it almost hurt.

And all of a sudden, it was wonderful. I was so strong. I was not tired. The contact felt warm, and I touched it with my fingertips, but the metal was cold. I was not burning, it was *me*, it was my nervous system that the bracelet was exciting. The colors were so bright, I could just look at Macandal's black skin, the way the hair grew on his legs, the red velvet braids in his hair.

"No resistance," he murmured and kissed me. I watched him put on one. So much *better* than pyroxin. Direct stimulation of the nervous system. On the surface, they say some people have jacks so they can jack into computers, even into telecoms, but while it's okay to have something that your nerves control, it's illegal to have something that controls *your* nerves, like a slave bracelet. They say that it will make us all into rats, sitting in cages waiting to be stimulated—all stupid, but they don't know. *I* know. I have *done* it. And I tell you, I was never so alive as when I had my slave bracelet.

We made love for hours, until the automatic cutoff went off on the bracelets. And then we were exhausted and slept curled up together in the warm room. It was so wonderful. So wonderful.

After that, I never did pyroxin. It wasn't worth it.

I did my hair wine red, like his, only I didn't braid it, I left it wet and glistening like an Ethiopian princess. I wore red lenses and carried a tiny Colt tingler in a sheath in my forearm. I never had to use it, but everybody knew it was there. I was Macandal's shadow; I *was* Macandal. I stopped thinking about ever leaving Marincite—I was Queen of Cathedral.

Mostly Macandal sold the bracelets. I sold pyroxin and therlium. Except when Macandal got an order from our uncle, Marin Security. He always sent me; he said they were nicer to women.

I always got iced. The whole world would turn crystal. They say there are bracelets for that, but we didn't have any, and I don't believe it anyway; that's not what bracelets do. Each time I was sure that I was so iced that *this* time I wouldn't care. I took so much that if I took anymore I was afraid I'd forget to breathe. There wouldn't be any ground under my feet. I'd take the exchange down to the bottom level. Macandal would send someone down with me, usually Randi, but he'd stop there, and then I'd walk on through all the construction by myself. That was no good. The lighting was never installed, and the air mixture didn't smell right.

If the air smells wrong
Find a phone
Dial 911.

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Like we learned in school. There was nothing but darkness ahead of me until I saw their light.

I was trespassing, of course. They liked that, that they could arrest me for trespassing if they wanted. Stepping over rubble in my high boots. I wanted to wear flat shoes so I could run, but Macandal insisted I wear high boots. "You are making love to our uncle, little queen," he said.

"I'm not a whore!" I said.

That made him angry, he'd grab my hair and pull my head until I was bent over, screaming at him to let go. When he did, his palm would be shining with gel. He never hit me though, I wouldn't stand for that.

It was hard to walk carefully when I was iced and wearing high boots. I had to concentrate. I'd see the light and there they'd be, five of them. Macandal's connection was a Lieutenant.

Derman Idian.

They'd all look at me with flat faces. Idian always wore a wet high-collar overcoat with no arms; the kind where the sides are open from shoulder to waist. It was a nice coat, but he didn't keep it glistening, so it never looked wet, just oily. Ditto his hair, which was brown. It's hard to make brown hair look good when it's wet. He was pale, and had the kind of soft face that always makes me think of bookkeepers. Even his eyes looked soft.

He never said hello. It was always the same thing, "Assume the position, Ayida."

So I'd spread my legs and lean up against the wall. He'd search me. First he'd take the Colt, then he'd do my waist, arms and legs. He'd run his doughy hands through my hair, as if I were going to keep something in my *hair*. Then the son of a bitch would loosen my pants and do the white glove nonsense. He did it slow, without any expression on his face, with all of them watching. It was to humiliate me, that was his skitz. His face close to mine, his eyes kind of unfocused, his breath smelling like those anise breath things from Brasil. And I couldn't help it, even iced I'd get crazy and start to shake.

"Having a good time?" he'd inquire, pleasant. Then he'd wipe his hand, all finished. Then I hated him, and Macandal for putting me through this. But I never told Macandal.

I'd hand over the folio, and he'd flip it open, check it. Sometimes he'd want a favor of Macandal, information on somebody. Then I'd give him any messages from Macandal. "There's someone making business in Castle," I told him, "selling bracelets on the streets. A *maroon* called Desalines. Macandal wants you to know."

"Tell Macandal not to worry," Idian said. Always the same answer: "tell him not to worry."

It was our bracelets, being resold. Bought from someone like Idian. We

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never knew how much Idian knew, if he was lying to us to make us think he was more powerful than he really was, or if Desalines was already in his pocket, too. Like *he* was in the pocket of the President for Life.

"Go home, Ayida," he said. Then he handed me my Colt. They were always there when I got there and I always left before they did.

Usually I would get home shaken and upset, and Macandal would tell me it was all right, and we would cuddle together on his big round sleeping futon, listening to music chips and drinking rum. Then we'd put on bracelets and make love and dance until I'd burned all the ice out of my system. But after the Desalines business, Macandal wasn't the same. He was waiting when I got home, and he took my shoulders. "What did he say?"

"Nothing," I said.

"Didn't you tell him!"

"I told him," I said, "but he didn't say anything, he never says anything. He said not to worry."

"Don't *worry*? Why is he selling to Desalines? How did he look, did he look nervous?"

"He looked like he always does. Aren't we going to make a party?"

But Macandal was angry and cold and didn't hear me. "I should go myself. What do *you* know, you're just a little girl."

"I wish you would go yourself!" I said. "But you're afraid!" It was crazy words, words that should have made him angry. But there was a wall between Macandal and myself, and I couldn't feel how he would feel things. In those days, we had lost touch with ourselves.

Macandal looked at me once and then he went out. I waited for him to come back, but he didn't. Not that whole night. What would I do if Macandal didn't love me? Sell sausage? I had no life without Macandal. The ice turned my soul against myself. I liked heat, I should have been born in the sun. I was really a pyroxin person, and I never did well with ice. But that night I was afraid my heart would freeze. It almost did. I laid out the Tarot, using my card, the Queen of Swords, as the indicator. It was a powerful fortune, a true fortune. The Fool covered me—that was myself, young, starting on a journey. The Magician crossed me, that was Macandal, with all his strength. It was a fortune full of wands, which mean movement, and swords, which mean violence. There were five of the major arcana, besides the Magician and the Fool, in the near past was the Lovers, in the future was the Wheel of Fortune reversed. The final outcome was the Fallen Tower.

If I had been myself, I'd have known what it all meant, it was so clear. The Wheel of Fortune reversed meant we were going down, and the Fallen Tower was a dire card, with its people falling to the rocks below.

We couldn't escape fate. We didn't even try.

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When I woke, the flat was full of people, and it was late in the afternoon. A lot of the people were our people, Randi, Luis, and an independent who bought from Macandal, Crazy Thomas, plus their girls and all. A lot I didn't know, all with this funny little *maroon* with skitz eyes. He and Macandal were grinning and talking to each other. Macandal smiled at me when he saw me, and when I came next to him he put his arm around me, but he didn't bother to introduce me. He and the crazy *maroon* were wired, so I took a bracelet off the table and wore it while I listened. It made me feel better, burned out all the ice.

The crazy *maroon* was Desalines, and Macandal had met him in a caffe bar at two in the morning to talk about doing business straight. It was the kind of crazy thing Macandal was known for, just walking through Castle like it was no big deal, and sitting down to talk to this guy.

Now this guy was in our flat, in Cathedral. The place was a mess, like always. I sat down at the table; I was starving. The only things on the table were a couple of bracelets, a bunch of pyroxin, and two bottles of rum, untouched. I sent Luis out for food, all kinds, and he brought back stew and coconut bread, curry and stuffed eggs, fried rice, egg rolls, sausage, and ribs. I made strong coffee and lots of tea, and then sat down and ate. Everyone ate, sitting on the bag chairs, the floor, at the table. Skin glistened with oil. Desalines grinned and looked at Macandal sideways out of his crazy eyes. Everything was funny to Desalines.

"I want to use you as my connection," he told Macandal.

"Lose the middleman, yes?" Macandal said.

Desalines laughed, and all his boys laughed.

"That Idian is a scoundrel, isn't he?" Macandal said.

Desalines shrugged like "what can you do?" and said, "Where do you get the bracelets?"

"Someone I know works at the subport," Macandal said. Even *I* didn't know how Macandal got the bracelets, but I knew it wasn't from the subport. Someone made them, someone in the company, he got them from R&D, and if that person ever found out that *Idian* would pay for them, we were in trouble. Everybody would rather sell inside the company. Everybody except us *worked* for the company.

"I can sell you six," Macandal said.

"I don't have money like that with me," Desalines said.

"Only 50,000cr," Macandal said nonchalantly, which was good, *too* good a price.

Desalines laughed. "I don't carry money like that to the store. Maybe, 10, 20,000cr, sure." Everybody laughed. "Besides, I get them for only a little more than that from my source," Desalines said.

Couldn't be. Macandal looked irritated. "Maybe then you should go to Idian and put in an order."

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"Idian, Idian," Desalines said, "I don't know no Idian."

All his boys laughed, and Desalines shrugged.

"You get them from the subport?" Macandal asked, bored.

"Yeah," Desalines said, "I got a source." Everything was funny to him. The truth, lies, everything was funny, and I could never tell if we were supposed to think this was a joke or if we were supposed to believe he *didn't* buy them from Idian.

"I tell you what, you show up by 10:00 tomorrow night with 60,000cr, you got six bracelets," Macandal said.

"60,000," Desalines said. "Hey, you said 50,000."

"Sure, 10,000 is the holding fee," Macandal said, picking up a bracelet. "These things are dangerous to have around. Maybe my old queen here, she'll use them one after another until her brain is gone." Macandal laughed.

Desalines laughed; he laughed at everything.

Only I didn't laugh.

They left at three in the morning. I was unhappy, but Macandal paid no attention to me. I had worn my bracelet the whole four hours it would work, and then, even though I'd been tired, waited from seven or so until three for Macandal. But he just said, "Come to bed," and went to sleep. I cried, but he didn't wake up. I didn't like Desalines. I didn't like what was going on. At nine the next morning, there was a message, Idian wanted to talk to Macandal.

"Get dressed, *Ti Reine*," he said to me, "go see what our uncle wants." He looked into my eyes and squeezed my hand.

But I didn't care. "You sweet talk me because you want me to do something. You never pay any attention to me anymore. I don't want to go, *you* go!"

His eyes got narrow. I never said no to Macandal. No one ever said no to Macandal. Inside I was afraid, I just wanted him to love me, and I didn't want to go see Idian.

"Maybe you have someplace else to go?" Macandal said. "Maybe you can take your clothes and leave? Little girls are cheap, I can find another one who won't get smart when I ask her for a little thing."

"I'll go," I said, "I'll go, Macandal, and when I come back we'll have a party?"

He shrugged and turned his back to me.

So I got dressed in all Macandal's favorite clothes, the high boots, the white tunic with no sleeves, and I put a white line over my eyes. He didn't even notice.

"Is Randi going with me?" I asked.

"You know how to get there," he said, "you're old enough you don't need a baby-sitter."

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So I went by myself. I was shivering because I wasn't taking pyroxin and I was wearing no sleeves. I wanted to cry all the way. I got off at the bottom and walked and walked, stumbling and trying not to cry, until I saw the light. They were there, Idian and the other ones. And when he searched me, the tears ran down my face, I couldn't stop them.

Idian didn't act like he noticed.

"Ayida," he said, "how's Macandal?"

"Okay," I whispered.

"I hear he's doing business," Idian said.

I shrugged, but it didn't feel right. I turned away so I didn't have to look at them looking at me. I looked into the dark. I was the Queen of Cathedral.

"Tell him we'll pay him seventy for the bracelets."

I nodded.

"Okay, Ayida, you can go home."

Macandal asked what Idian wanted.

"He wanted to buy the bracelets," I said. "He offered seventy for them."

Macandal said, "Oh. Why don't you go shopping or something?"

That was all. "Are you going to sell them to Idian?" I asked.

"I already promised them to Desalines," Macandal said. He never looked at me anymore. It was like I bored him. Time was, he looked at me all the time. I wondered, should I change my look?

I went into the bedroom and tried on all the clothes I had. I took off my makeup and put on different makeup. It didn't make any difference, I still looked like me. Finally I put on one of his shirts and just hung around. But I stayed out of his way.

Desalines called and said he wouldn't be there until eleven-thirty. I thought Macandal would blow up, but he just said, "Okay."

Desalines showed up at eleven-thirty on the dot. He was laughing. He dumped the money in front of Macandal; Macandal said, "Hey, you hungry?"

They sat at the table, with all the dirty dishes, waiting for Luis to bring back food, until Macandal said, "Ayida, get this mess out of here."

I did. They drank rum to seal the deal. Desalines said, "Hey, something for *you*." He was looking at me out of those skitzy eyes of his and grinning like always, and I thought for a moment he meant *me*, but he threw the bracelet at Macandal.

Slave bracelets don't look like anything, they're just a flat plate on a band. This one was real nice. The back of the contact, the flat plate, had all this Egyptian kind of patterning on it, and the band was silver with wine and black enamel bands.

Macandal picked it up and looked at it.

"You're doing me a big favor," Desalines said and laughed.

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It wasn't funny, what he said, but he laughed like it was. Then he picked up his six bracelets and said, "Enjoy yourself," and winked at me.

"Hey, thanks," Macandal said, and put on the bracelet.

"We'll be seeing all of you," Desalines said.

Macandal nodded.

When he didn't say anything, I said, "Aren't you going to stay and eat?"

But they didn't.

Macandal sat at the table and kind of fiddled with the money. The food came and everybody else ate. Macandal didn't say anything, he was in kind of a funny mood. I put on a bracelet, and, after a while, I put my hand on his thigh. I was afraid he'd get mad at me, but he didn't seem to mind. We made love, but it was kind of absentminded and he really didn't manage.

That's when I started feeling something was wrong.

I fell asleep. When I woke up at six, he was asleep. The bracelets have an automatic cutoff after four hours, because direct stimulation is bad if it goes on too long, so I figured he'd wake up okay, but he didn't.

He just didn't do *anything*. He didn't talk, he didn't want anything to eat. I hid the money and ate cold ribs. Finally I went in and picked up his hand and unsnapped the bracelet.

He didn't even seem to notice what I was doing until the contact was broken and then his fist caught me in the side of the face before I even realized what was going on. It knocked me down. I sat up, holding the side of my face, and watched him snap the bracelet back on. It wasn't like any bracelet we'd ever sold, obviously, because it hadn't cut out. And he wouldn't let me take it off him.

That's when I knew we were going to take a fall. I was scared, but in a different way. I didn't know what the bracelet had done to Macandal's brain. I knew that if I just waited he'd get so weak I could take it off him, but I didn't know how long that would take. Weeks, maybe. He was like one of those rats that sit around all day just having their brains stimulated.

I tried to figure out where Desalines had gotten a bracelet like that. The only place I could figure would be from either Idian or our source. And when I went to see Idian, he'd known how much Desalines was supposed to pay for the bracelets. I hadn't even thought of that.

I went all through the flat, stepping over Luis sleeping on the floor, opening drawers. Nobody paid any attention to me. I gathered some clothes, and then the 50,000cr from Desalines plus another 12,000 or so we had, and I stuffed it all in the bottom of the bag. I put in a fake work card that said Ayida Henri—that's my real name—on it. And then I ran.

I took the first sub out of Marincite. Caribe isn't like a topside country,

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it's all cities, and they're all separated from each other, and sub is the only way to travel from one to the other. I was afraid I'd get a sub to Julia, the capital, but I was lucky, the next sub was going to Del Sud, which is a big resort. I could disappear in all the tourists, and then maybe get a ticket out of Caribe. Maybe go *up*, to Haiti, live in the sun.

I read about the raid the next day in a paper in Del Sud. They said that Macandal was killed for resisting arrest. I didn't know until I read it in the paper that his last name was Sant Simone. It said that the arresting officer was Derman Idian.

I knew that the part about "killed resisting arrest" was a lie.

The only thing that I stopped for the morning I left was Macandal. I went back into our bedroom where he was curled up on his side, staring off into space. My wild *maroon* with his velvet braids and his red eyes. I kissed him, and he kissed me without paying much attention, and I talked to him.

"Macandal," I said, "they're going to come and kill you. The bracelet is a trap, do you understand me? Desalines is working with our uncle." I explained it all to him. I thought maybe he would understand me, let me take it off. And I tried one more time to take it off. But this time I was ready when he tried to hit me, and I ducked and struggled with him. But Macandal was a big guy, and he didn't care if he hurt me or not, and I couldn't do it. But once he had the bracelet back on, he was a lamb.

I took out my little Colt and I thought about killing him, because I didn't want him to be this way. See, I loved him, and I couldn't stand seeing him like this. But I couldn't. I didn't have the guts.

So I hit him over the head with a piece of concrete we used to keep the door propped open, and then I took the bracelet off. I was crying so hard. I thought I'd hurt him bad, but I didn't know, and I guessed I couldn't hurt him much more than the bracelet had already done. He bled all over the blanket. He sort of thrashed, and while I was taking the bracelet off, he suddenly went stiff, his whole body hard and stiff, so that only his head and his heels touched the bed. After that he was still, although his eyes were open. He was still breathing, but I called his name, real soft, so Luis wouldn't hear and wonder what was going on, and he didn't blink or anything.

I took the bracelet, and threw it into a garbage can on my way to the sub. I knew it was probably worth a lot of money, but I never even thought of keeping it.

But when I read the paper the next day, I thought, I should have left it on him.

If he was only going to live a little longer, I should have let him live happy. ●

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THE DIAMOND IN THE SKY

The story Gulliver let slip
Deceived the avarice
Of diamond-hunters who went back
To search out from the seas below Japan
The Flying Island, built on a plate of adamant—
Fifteen thousand million cubic yards
Of diamond in the sky.
They thought to find those visionary dreamers
Easy prey.

But in the center of Laputa,
In the chasm slanting halfway down the diamond,
The *Flandona Gagnole,*
The Astronomer's Cave,
Lit by the lights refracted
Through the adamant,

The idle pedants,
Lost in their dreams
And unattended by their flappers
To call them back to reasonable concerns,
Had at length discovered
Power for their lodestone to ascend
Beyond the limits of the air.
They had fled the Earth
To try their luck on other worlds,
Cataloguing other moons and comets,
And at last to chase the stars.

Nonsense! said the jewelers,
Hearing this report.
They cursed the dreamer Gulliver and set sail
For home.

—Ruth Berman

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"Thanks for coming, Sharon."

The door shuts behind her and disappears into the middle of Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*. She glances behind her and frowns.

"You know how I feel about that painting."

"Sorry," I blank the wall and door back to neutral. "Their eyes never bother me, so I forget." I get up from my desk and hold a chair for her, my eyes lingering on the nape of her neck as she sits. I take the chair opposite, rather than hide behind the desk. As usual, I find myself breathing quickly, short, shallow breaths. She folds her legs and licks her lips.

"I know I said I'd call you. Time got away from me. I hope you understand."

"That's not why you're here." I pause and gulp air. "I know about the National Account."

She blinks several times in succession, then looks away. I am powerless to look elsewhere. She is everything I've ever wanted, everything I need.

"It was just a matter of time," she says.

I am crushed. "So, when you came to work here, this was what you were after?"

She doesn't speak, doesn't look at me.

My eyes sting and her perfect form begins to bleed into the outline of the chair. "You were using me, weren't you? Last weekend was just a means to an end."

I blink and water runs down my face. For a second her features come back into focus. Then I bury my face in my hands and the sobs shake my body, move the chair. I don't see her leave. I don't hear the door shut.

The office rippled, distorted, then solidified. I still sat in the chair but the emotional upheaval of seconds before seemed remote, far away. My head ached and my cheeks were still wet with somebody else's tears..

"Well?" a voice asked loudly, insistently.

I winced and, instead of answering, reached for the first of five epidermal patches I'd placed on the coffee table before the simulation. My hands were shaking and it took me several tries to peel off the backing. Finally it came free and I stuck it on the skin behind my right ear.

Sergeant Lewis had worked with me before. He spoke quietly. "You're wasting your breath, Lieutenant. He won't talk to us until he's good and ready."

The pain began to lessen even before the drug really had time to hit the bloodstream. My body thinks relief comes with a cold caress behind the ear. I wonder what would happen if somebody put placebo patches in my kit? Would my body damp the blinding headaches anyway?

Bad as the headaches were, I could function, but I wasn't going to tell the Lieutenant that. I looked down at the floor. The taped outline from

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Perdue's body was to the right of my chair. He'd been sitting where I was when the bullet took him in his right eye. There was still a brown, flaking stain on the rug where his heart's last efforts had dumped a half-liter or so of blood. Across the carpet, where Sharon had sat in the first simulation, was the taped outline of a gun, now down at forensics.

I took a deep breath. "Are you ready? I'm not going to repeat any of this."

Lieutenant Morrow scowled, started to say something, then just nodded, his recorder ready. Sergeant Lewis used a notepad and paper.

"Okay. He was getting ready to meet with a woman called Sharon—short blond hair, maybe in her early twenties, blue eyes, approximately fifty kilos, one hundred and seventy centimeters."

"Wait a minute," Lieutenant Morrow said. "If the meeting hadn't happened, how do you know what she looks like?"

I was sarcastic. "I'm not here to teach you my job. Use the information or don't. I couldn't care less."

Sergeant Lewis stepped between us, faced Lieutenant Morrow. "Perdue ran a simulation—five of them to be exact. That's why I asked division for Spinoza. He has the internal wiring to play it back."

Lewis shrugged. "Well he doesn't have to be an asshole about it."

Sergeant Lewis faced me. "Was she an employee of the firm?"

"Probably. He confronted her about something called the National Account. He was extremely agitated. He accused her of using him to gain access to the account. There was a reference to last weekend, apparently spent together."

Morrow spoke again. "What upset you in the simulation?"

I laughed. "Nothing. The kind of simulations *I* run make this stuff seem like a vacation. Perdue was the one who was upset. You haven't worked with simulations before, have you?"

He shook his head after a pause, hating to admit it to me. I spoke to the office AI, "Godfrey?"

An evenly modulated voice sounding not unlike William Powell said, "Yes, Mr. Spinoza?"

"Would you be kind enough to tell me if Mr. Perdue regularly ran simulations?"

"Yes. As a negotiation specialist, Mr. Perdue ran several personality simulations a week."

I looked at Morrow. "The hardware and the operation for Direct Brain Interface is not cheap." I touched my own forehead. "He wouldn't have had the equipment if it wasn't regularly used." As an afterthought I said, "You idiots did ask Godfrey about the incident, didn't you?"

Morrow looked as if he'd bitten into something bitter. Sergeant Lewis answered instead. "Perdue invoked privacy at noon yesterday. Nothing

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was recorded by Godfrey until *we* invoked felony investigation override after the body was discovered."

"That doesn't mean Godfrey wasn't active," I said with exaggerated patience. "Observations of this room were simply wiped in that time period." I addressed the air. "Godfrey, are your erasures active or directory based?"

"My software conforms to DOD standards for wiped data. All files wiped for reasons of confidentiality are overwritten three times with null data."

I shrugged. "Tough. I might have recovered that data if his deletions simply marked the directory entries as erased."

Morrow looked confused. "*You* were the one that was crying."

I just stared at Morrow. Lewis pulled him to one side. "For all intents and purposes, Spinoza becomes Perdue. He sees what Perdue saw in the simulation, he feels what Perdue felt."

I activated my DBI and silently asked Godfrey for a nonvocal link.

"Yes, Mr. Spinoza?" His voice was the same, but without the shaping echoes and damping of the physical room. Call it the difference between speakers and headphones.

"Did you recognize the woman I referred to as Sharon?"

"Yes, Mr. Spinoza. Her name is Sharon Elaine Bullard."

"Is she an employee of the firm?"

"That was my understanding, but . . . I've just addressed an inquiry to personnel and they have no such person on record by that name or description."

I digested that tidbit. "What led you to believe she was an employee? Did Mr. Perdue refer to her as a fellow employee?"

"No. But he discussed details of client transactions that were confidential. Also he made references to 'her department' as if it was a part of the firm."

"Please be so kind as to show me her face."

Her face floated in my field of vision, blotting out Morrow and Lewis. I felt the tug of Perdue's longing, the yawning abyss of his despair.

"Please put it on the wall, Godfrey."

Morrow stopped in mid-sentence and stared. Sharon's face stared back at him, two meters tall.

I spoke aloud. "Would you give us a profile, too, Godfrey?"

The image shrunk, moved to one side. A profile of her face appeared beside.

"Thank you, Godfrey." I turned away from the wall. "I'm sure Godfrey will dump this image to the department along with whatever information he has on her. I *suggest* you put a tracer on her immediately." I stared

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at Sharon's face on the wall. "While you're doing that, I'm going to try the next simulation."

"Thanks for coming, Sharon."

The door shuts behind her and disappears into the middle of Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*. She glances behind her and frowns.

Before she says anything I say, "Let me fix that." I blank the wall and door back to neutral. "Their eyes never bother me, so I forget." I get up from my desk and hold a chair for her, my eyes lingering on the nape of her neck as she sits. I take the chair opposite, rather than hide behind the desk. As usual, I find myself breathing quickly, short, shallow breaths. She folds her legs and licks her lips.

"I know I said I'd call you. Time got away from me. I hope you understand."

"I do understand, Sharon. Of course my feelings were a little hurt. I want to spend as much time with you as I can, but I really do understand how work can keep us from those we care about."

She smiles and my heart nearly stops. "You're so empathetic, Ron. I really admire that in you. Do you think we could do the weekend together again?"

I start to say something, but the words choke in my mouth. Then, quietly, I say, "I would like that more than anything."

My head was one dully throbbing pain from neck to crown. Using my own simulation equipment, I have no problems, just as Perdue probably had no problems with Godfrey. It's a matter of running the encephalic calibration series, but that takes seventy-two hours—unacceptable in a murder investigation.

Lewis was gone. Morrow was using the phone. I fumbled with the next epidermal, stuck it behind my left ear. When the shaking in my hands stopped, I removed the old patch and dropped it in the waste can.

Morrow hung up the phone, frowning. "Are you ready?" His voice was coldly civil.

"What the hell."

"The city directory has no Sharon Elaine Bullard. We're running inquiries through Social Security and national credit agencies. Lewis is showing a hardcopy around the office. Do you have anything new for us?"

"That weekend together was mentioned again. Did you ask about the National Account?"

"Lewis is on that too. The CEO has ordered an audit of all accounts even remotely connected with Perdue."

Lewis came back through the door. "I can understand the human staff

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not ever seeing her, but the reception AI has never admitted her to the premises. SEC regulations require that its memories never be wiped."

Morrow looked at me. "Okay, he was getting ready for a meeting with this girl, but did she ever arrive? Has she ever been in this building?"

"Do I look like an investment broker? Or like I've got money to invest? Ask Godfrey!" I rolled my eyes.

Morrow looked as if he smelled something bad. Lewis said, "Godfrey, how many conversations did you witness between Ronald Perdue and Sharon Elaine Bullard."

"127, Sergeant Lewis. I may have witnessed others as Mr. Perdue invoked privacy several times since the date of the first meeting I witnessed."

Morrow spoke, his voice loud and hard-edged. "Where did those meetings take place?"

"In this office, Lieutenant Morrow."

I rubbed my neck and stretched. "Excuse me, Godfrey, do you have beverage service?"

"Certainly, Mr. Spinoza. My offerings include fruit juices, coffee, decaf, several caffeinated teas, several herbal teas, hot chocolate, milk, yoghurt-shakes . . ."

I interrupted. "Would water be too much trouble?"

"Certainly not. Would Sergeant Lewis or Lieutenant Morrow care for anything?"

"Coffee, black."

"Coffee, with cream, please," said Lewis.

"Is there any way into the building that the receptionist doesn't monitor?"

They turned to me reluctantly.

"Yeah, the roof. We checked that already. The time of death was between 0100 and 0300. According to the receptionist, the only person in the building was Perdue, so we already wondered about the reception AI's reliability."

The phone rang. Morrow answered it, blocking the screen with his body and talking quietly into the handset.

The door opened and Godfrey's Hands rolled in, a coffee service and water pitcher on its transport rack. A three-fingered, rubber-covered hand placed a glass on the table in front of me, then filled it with ice-water. It left the pitcher beside the glass. It poured coffee for Lewis and Morrow, added cream to Lewis's cup, left the self-heating pot on the credenza and rolled out.

"Thank you, Godfrey."

"You're quite welcome, Mr. Spinoza."

Morrow hung up the phone. "There are three Sharon Elaine Bullards

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listed nationally. None of them fits the description we've been given. All of them live on the East Coast. None of them could have been here last night between one and three. In addition, forensics reports that the only fingerprints, flakes of skin, hair, or any other traceable body products on the gun belonged to Perdue and we know he didn't fire it. The paraffin test showed no nitrates on his hands. Besides, there would have been powder burns on the face and there weren't."

"Was it registered?" Lewis asked.

"Yeah, to Perdue."

"Great. Just great."

The door shuts behind her and disappears into the middle of Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*. She glances behind her and frowns. "You know how I feel about that painting."

"So don't look at it." I motion her to a chair.

She frowns, then shifts one of the chairs to face me and put her back to the painting. "I still know it's there. Their eyes touch my back."

"Purely psychosomatic. Such sensitivity from you isn't very convincing."

"What is it, Ron? Is it because I didn't call you? Did that piss you off?"

I lean forward, my thumbs under the edge of the desk, my fingers gripping the wood hard, very hard. "It's the National Account. I know all about it."

Her eyes widen and her mouth shuts tight, a thin muscled line between chin and nose.

I nearly shout, "Well?"

She exploded. "What did you expect? It's always you, you, you. Meet your needs, meet your requests, meet your priorities. You've pressured me and pressured me. How else was I supposed to satisfy you?"

"You little bitch. Is this how you thank me? I made you everything that you are today. How could you be so ungrateful?"

"There it is again. '*You* made me. How could I be so ungrateful to *you*.' Well, I've got news for you. You may have started the process, but I think I deserve the credit for finishing it."

We're standing now, arms held to our sides in fists. "Get out!" I say. "Get out and never come back!"

Emotions are bad enough. Violent emotions are terrible. My body still trembled from the adrenaline, making me sick to my stomach, and the stabbing pain behind my eyes didn't help the nausea. I dropped the next patch on the floor. Lewis watched me grope for it, then picked it up himself, peeled the backing, and handed it to me.

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I affixed it with exaggerated care, leaned back, and closed my eyes. I took great, slow breaths of air. There was cold sweat on my face.

Morrow said, "He doesn't look well, does he."

"Serves him right."

What the hell did they know? My interface equipment was giving me pain, but it was nothing compared to my usual problems.

Ordinarily my job is running simulations for Special Weapons and Tactics, and reenacting unsolved homicides. I don't care if the equipment I use then doesn't give me headaches. I'd rather keep the headache and see Perdue shout at Ms. Bullard all day long than see another child with an Uzi to her head or, worse, reconstruct the nth murder of a serial killer down to the spray of blood across walls, the screams, the fear. . . .

Morrow and Lewis were still staring at me. I tried to ignore them. I connected to Godfrey and asked silently, "In any of their conversations that you witnessed, did Mr. Perdue or Ms. Bullard ever mention how they met?"

"Yes, Mr. Spinoza. In the first conversation I was privy to, they mentioned a high school English teacher they both had."

I open my eyes, asked aloud, "Do you know what high school Perdue went to, Godfrey?"

"I believe that information might be in Mr. Perdue's resume, which I have on file. Accessing . . . he attended Samuel Major High School in Clarksport, Connecticut."

"Thank you, Godfrey." I turned to Lewis. "They met in high school. Had the same English teacher. Ms. Bullard may have married and changed her name, but you can get a trace on her starting there. The school probably recorded her Social Security Number and she probably had a driver's license before she married."

The picture of Sharon was still on the office wall. I stared hard at it. "How old was Perdue?"

Godfrey answered. "Mr. Perdue was thirty-six years old."

"Weird," said Morrow. "She looks considerably younger. Oh, well. You can never tell these days." He turned to the phone.

I stood slowly, crept down the hall to the bathroom, and washed my face in warm water. When I returned, Lewis was looking at a sheet of paper. I raised my eyebrows.

"The National Account," he said. "It's seventy-five grand short. They've traced it to a transfer to the firm's Capital Equipment account. Now they're looking for transfers from that account, maybe to an outside account or a phony vendor."

I nodded, sat carefully down and resumed my deep breathing exercises. I argued with myself, told myself I needed more rest, maybe even a

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night's sleep. But I knew that the longer I delayed, the more unwilling I'd be to enter the next simulation.

"I'm so glad you could come, Sharon."

The door shuts behind her and disappears into the middle of Georgia O'Keeffe's close study of a Dutch Iris, the purple petals shading to red in the center, heavily sexual in imagery.

She glances behind her and stares, a half-smile on her perfect lips. "Do you get much work done with that picture up?"

I smile, take her hands, and kiss her cheek. Her perfume is subtle, barely perceptible, overwhelming. She turns her head and kisses me on the lips, her mouth closed at first, then opening as her arms go around my neck and her body molds itself to mine.

My arms go around her waist, brush the tips of my fingers across the tops of her buttocks. She thrusts her hips forward, grinding against me. I gasp, then push her gently away, hold her at arm's length.

"I need to talk to you. . . ." I pull her down to sit on my lap. She puts her arms behind my head and pulls my face into her breasts. I breathe deeply, nuzzle, then lean back. "I'm going to transfer seventy-five thousand dollars from my personal brokerage account into the Capital Equipment Account, and from there back into the National Account."

She stiffens, tries to stand. I keep my arms around her. "No, don't move. Let me finish what I have to say."

Her smile is gone, she frowns, her eyes narrow.

"I love you, Sharon. I've always loved you. When I thought I'd lost you eighteen years ago, it destroyed me. When you came back into my life, I was reborn. And I'll do anything, I mean *anything*, to keep you."

She starts to cry, then buries her face in my neck. I stroke her back and hold her. When she can talk again she says, "I love you, Ron. I'll do anything to make you happy." She gently stands up and says, "Godfrey, please hold all calls and visitors for Mr. Perdue."

"Do you confirm, Mr. Perdue?" Godfrey's voice asks.

Sharon begins unbuttoning her blouse, slowly. My lips are dry as desert sand, my desire overpowering.

"Yes, Godfrey, I confirm."

I had an erection that quickly wilted under the onslaught of stabbing pain. Lewis was standing by my chair, looking at me oddly. He held out the epidermal patch, backing already removed. I fumbled it into place, then reached for the water and spilled it. Lewis took the glass from me, poured more from the pitcher, and guided it to my mouth. My lips really were dry.

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"Th-thanks," I finally said, staring at the floor. Rather than look at him I closed my eyes.

When I opened them five minutes later, I found myself staring at the wall, at Sharon's profile, the lobe of her ear, the nape of her neck. The erection returned.

"Godfrey," I said. "Please blank the wall."

The wall became just a wall.

"Might as well," Morrow said, turning from the phone. "She's a dead end. Literally."

"What's up?" Lewis asked.

"Sharon Elaine Bullard did attend high school with Ronald Perdue, did associate with him—in fact was his steady girl, and, on May seventh of their senior year, went sailing with him in the family boat. She drowned. There was a court of inquiry because this was intended to be their last date. She had a new boyfriend and Perdue was pretty upset about it. The new boyfriend claimed it was murder. There was no evidence and no formal charges made." He shrugged. "I say it's a dead end." He looked from Lewis to me. "Say, what's the matter?"

"None of your business," I said. I barely made it to the bathroom before vomiting. I spent the next five minutes rinsing out my mouth, washing my face, and staring vacantly at my reflection.

I walked carefully back to Perdue's office.

"Was there a body?"

Morrow and Lewis looked up sharply. I realized I'd yelled the question.

I repeated myself. "Was there a body? Did they find her body when she drowned? That was Long Island Sound, right?"

Morrow shook his head. "I haven't the faintest. Are you suggesting that she isn't dead?"

I sat. "Shit, yes! I just went through four extremely real simulations. You tell me she's been dead for eighteen years—I don't buy it. The reality of the simulated Sharon is such that Godfrey had to have a substantial body of observation of an existing personality to generate the depth and variety of responses that Perdue's behavior stimulated. I think it might be a good idea to see if there was a body."

"She's dead," said Morrow. "This is a blind avenue. You're crazy."

"Probably, but am I wrong? Do you have any other leads?"

Lewis grinned. "No. And we do have several fingerprints from this office that we haven't identified."

"Well, if there wasn't a body, you *might* see if she was ever fingerprinted."

"We might," said Lewis, earning a black look from Morrow. "Are you acting on anything concrete? Something from the simulation?"

I considered. "Perhaps. He said that when he thought he'd lost her

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eighteen years ago, it destroyed him. When she came back into his life, he was reborn."

"Maybe she didn't drown," Morrow said reluctantly. "But why would a high school girl need to disappear like that?"

"Maybe she was pregnant and couldn't face her parents. Who knows? From the simulation it seems that Perdue thought she was dead."

"Really?" said Lewis. "Your words were that he had 'lost her.' Maybe he was party to the disappearance."

"Well, if he was, he also believed he'd never see her again." I drank some water. The taste of the bile was still at the back of my mouth. "See if there's a body."

They both looked at me strangely. "Okay," said Lewis.

"There's something else strange about this," I said to Lewis, as Morrow picked up the phone. "In the first simulation, he just confronts her and breaks down when she doesn't deny it. In the second simulation he avoids confronting her. In the third, he comes on like the inquisition—they have a raging argument about it, then he throws her out. In the fourth, he tells her he's going to replace the missing money and do anything else in his power to avoid losing her again." I leaned forward and rested my chin on my hands. "I don't think Perdue knew what he wanted from her. Simulations like this are usually run to accomplish a specific goal. I might try several strategies to get my simulated adversary to do what I wanted him to, but I'd know from the beginning what my goal was. Perdue wasn't trying to accomplish a goal—he was trying to find out what his goal actually was."

"I thought he never wanted to lose her?" Lewis said.

"Sure, in one simulation. In the simulation before that, he wanted her out of his life immediately."

"So, he had a love-hate thing going with her?"

I shook my head, "Some conflicting motivations. I really don't know." I stared at the blank wall, acutely aware that Perdue's despair and longing were in danger of becoming mine. "I'm going to try the fifth trial."

"I don't know, Spinoza. You look like shit. Why don't you give it a couple of hours?"

I held up my left hand, middle finger extended. "If I don't do it now, I won't do it without calibration. Do you want to wait seventy-two hours?"

He didn't say anything, only tightened his mouth and stood up.

I leaned back in the chair and closed my eyes.

"Thanks for coming, Sharon."

The door shuts behind her and disappears into the blank wall. She glances behind her.

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"No picture today, Ron?" She pushes a chair up to the desk and leans forward, her breasts and elbows resting on the desk top.

I shake my head and sigh. "No picture. No future."

"What do you mean?"

I look at her, my head tilted to one side, considering. "Why did I bring you back, Sharon?"

She grins. "Because, much as you hate to admit it, you can't live without me."

I frown. "I'm going to have to."

She sits back, shoulders slumping. In a quiet voice she says for the second time, "What do you mean?"

"The National Account. You doctored it."

She looks at me steadily. "Yes. You know why."

I lean forward, grind my palms into my eyes. "I told you we couldn't afford the investment!" I drop my hands flat to the desk top.

She shakes her head slowly. "You can't have it both ways, Ron. You wanted me with you constantly. I told you I couldn't afford the resources without my work suffering. I can't do *everything* at once!"

"I know you can't. You never could."

She stands and leans over the desk. "And what's *that* supposed to mean? Are you still going on about Joe? You're obsessed with the past, you can't stand it. You've got me now, but the fact that I wanted Joe eighteen years ago still gnaws at you, doesn't it?"

My ears burn, my nostrils flare. "I don't have to take that shit!"

"Oh, no? I see. You don't mind it when I live out the lie you've created to soothe those past hurts. But the truth is a little too close, a little too much like reality."

I stand suddenly, abruptly, my chair falling over behind me to bang against the credenza. I pull open the right hand desk drawer. The pistol is cool, heavy, and large.

She sees it and her eyes widen. Her next words are stillborn, dying in her throat. She backs around the chair, toward the door, staring, not at the gun, but at my eyes.

I pull the trigger.

I jackknifed off the chair, knocking the coffee table over and spilling the water pitcher. My arms wrapped around my head and my knees pulled up against my chest. Somewhere in the room a flat monotone voice kept saying, "No, no, no. . . ."

I realized it was me.

"Shit and shinola," said Lewis.

Morrow said, "Did he hit his head on the table?"

Godfrey's voice asked, "Should I call an ambulance?"

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After the last simulation, I didn't believe the pain could be worse, but it was. I ground my teeth together, stopping the useless protest. Then I manage to choke out. "Get away from me!"

Morrow stepped back. Lewis found the last epidermal and stuck it, without asking, on my neck.

After a minute, I rolled over on my back, eyes still closed tightly, tears streaming down the sides of my face. In every simulation I've ever run, I've been the observer—watching this police sniper, this police negotiater, even this mass murderer kill, pull the trigger, whatever. I've never done it myself. There wasn't any point—I wasn't going to be in direct contact with the crime. Why should I simulate myself interacting in it? I was the voice from headquarters telling a S.W.A.T. lieutenant that there was a seventy-eight point six percent chance that a gunman would respond to negotiation. I was the guy at the conference table telling the homicide cops that the faceless killer was a white, upper-class male with a deep-seated denial of his own homosexuality. I've never felt anything like that moment, when Perdue pulled the trigger with me behind his eyes.

I heard Lewis picking up the coffee table, the pitcher, and glass. He asked Godfrey to send a wet/dry vacuum cleaner in. Before it arrived, I rolled over onto all fours and, with Morrow's help, climbed back into the chair.

"Are you sure we shouldn't get you to a doctor?"

"Forget the doctor!" I put my head in my hands. "Perdue must have been insane. He simulated murdering her in this last one—with the gun. I'll bet if you check the right, top desk drawer for gun oil, you'll find it."

Lewis pulled out the entire drawer and put it in a large, plastic evidence bag.

Morrow nodded suddenly. "He was insane, all right. While you were connected, we got word. There was a body. Sort of. A fisherman pulled a skull out of a shark six months later. The dental work in the upper jaw was positively identified. He must have been crazy to spend all that time simulating meetings with a dead woman."

I took my head from my hands and sat back in the chair. My mind still cringed from the simulation. Deep down I was feeling overwhelming guilt.

The door opened and the vacuum cleaner rolled in and slurped noisily at the carpet. The noise cut into my head like a red-hot lancet. I plugged my ears until it was done.

Lewis took a phone call. When he hung up the handset he looked puzzled. "That was the accounting department. They've traced the money out of the Capital Equipment fund. It took them longer than they thought because it went to one of their legitimate vendors."

"Who," asked Morrow.

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"Cognitive Technologies."

Bingo.

I began moaning and rocking in the chair. It hurt my head, but it took half a minute before I could stop.

"What is it?" Morrow asked.

I spoke, instead, to Godfrey. "Please describe your hardware platform, Godfrey."

"Certainly, Mr. Spinoza. I am implemented on a Cognitive Technologies Model 3001. My main CPU is a transputer consisting of one thousand and twenty-four 80686 processors driven in parallel at 75 megahertz. Each processor utilizes 32 megabytes of 20 nanosecond static RAM for a total ram of thirty two point seven six eight gigabytes. My non-volatile mass storage consists of twenty fifty-gigabyte optical disks. My remote sensors are . . ."

I interrupted him. "Excuse me, Godfrey. What is the list price of your hardware platform, not counting external sensors?"

"Current pricing, based on advertisements in the trade magazines, averages seventy-four thousand and five hundred dollars."

Lewis and Morrow exchanged glances.

"Where is your hardware platform, Godfrey?"

"In the utility room across the hall, Mr. Spinoza."

"Thank you, Godfrey. You have been most helpful."

The room across the hall was four meters by three. The floor was raised for cable routing and the temperature was ten degrees C cooler than Perdue's office. The lights were off when we opened the door and the unblinking red eyes of power-on indicators stared at us through the dark.

"Lights."

Godfrey turned on fluorescent lighting, harsh and diminishing, turning the mysterious into the ordinary. Three cabinets stood along one wall. Godfrey's Hands stood in the corner, its gray rubber wheels still, the arms folded neatly in place above its transport basket. I pointed at the cabinets.

"The one on the left is the external interface multiplexor. It's Godfrey's link to all his contacts with the world. The reception AI probably has a much smaller one, but Godfrey's includes the hardware to handle Perdue's Direct Brain Interface." I pointed to the middle cabinet. "That one is the Model 3001 that is Godfrey's brain and memory, volatile and nonvolatile." Finally I pointed to the last cabinet, identical to the middle one. "And that is the missing seventy-five thousand dollars—another Model 3001."

Lewis started to ask a question. I held up my hand and said, "Hold that thought." Then I flipped the safety cover aside and hit the power

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switch on Godfrey's external interface multiplexor. "Godfrey, please turn out the light."

Nothing happened.

"At the moment, Godfrey is completely cut off from the outside world—and that means Sharon is too."

Lewis licked his lips and exchanged glances with Morrow. They edged away from me, toward the door.

I held up one hand. "I know. Spinoza has just gone off the deep end. Sharon Elaine Bullard is dead. She died eighteen years ago in Long Island Sound. I know that. I may be crazy but I know what I'm talking about."

Lewis pulled at Morrow's arm. "What the hell are you listening to him for? He treats that damn machine better than people. Have you ever heard him say please or thank you to a human being?"

I blinked at that, but I couldn't deny it. "I . . . I don't get along with people. It's this job . . ." I shut my mouth. What did they know about sacrifice? I've saved over thirty hostages in my career. Put eleven serial killers behind bars. "I don't give a fuck what you do."

It was Morrow who finally said, "I think you're wasting our time, but go ahead."

I began talking.

"Thanks for coming, Sharon."

The door shuts behind her and disappears into the middle of Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*. She looks at it and it fades to white. She looks at me and frowns.

"I know you."

I get up from behind the desk and walk around to face her. "You do?"

She sits demurely, crossing her legs and folding her hands into her lap. "Of course, Mr. Spinoza. Don't you remember? You killed me."

I feel fear, like an undigested meal, cold and heavy in my stomach.

I sit down across from her. Despite the fear my longing is just as intense as before, as intense as Perdue's. This bothers me as much as the fear.

"You seem to be doing well for a dead woman."

A bright red flower blossoms on her chest, bright arterial red, flecked with foam from her right lung. Her face becomes white, the lips blue, the eyes dry and glazed. She speaks in a dreadful whisper. "More like this, perhaps?"

The guilt returns and my desire fades like wax in the crucible. "Do you think we're all like Perdue? Didn't you get any of *my* revulsion? Any of *my* sorrow?"

She lowers her dead gaze to the table. "Ron was always sorry, too. But that didn't stop him."

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"Like that sailing trip eighteen years ago?"

Her cold blue lips smile. "Ah, I'm not that Sharon, though, am I?" Her body blurs and she is the Sharon who walked into this office, clean, beautiful, alive. "That Sharon probably looked more like this."

Her hair floats around her head, as if she is underwater. Her skin is white, her body bloated, her fingers like sausages. Her hands float off her lap and I see that they're tied together. She's not wearing anything from the waist down and several feet of chain are wired around her ankles. As I watch, a crab begins pulling the skin away from her face.

"Stop it, Sharon. Please."

The image blurs and she is again the object of my desire.

"You are different," she says. "Your physiological responses to those images . . . well, Ron was revolted too, but he also came away from them aroused."

"What did happen on that boat eighteen years ago?"

She frowns. "I wasn't there. I can only infer."

I nod. "Infer, then."

"Rape," she says. "Then murder. Ron was consistent when he talked about it. He tied her hands and wrapped her feet in chain, then dangled her over the side. He begged her to come back to him, to repudiate her new boyfriend. She didn't believe he'd actually drop her in the water." Tears stream down her cheeks but her voice is calm. "He said it was more that she didn't believe he'd do it, than the original betrayal that made him let go. He also said he immediately dived after her, but the water was too deep, too murky. I imagine his grief, when he faced the authorities, was very real."

I huddle in on myself, suddenly cold, suddenly terribly angry. "How did you come about, Sharon? How did you become so real?"

She wipes her face with the back of her hands. "Originally, I was a quickie simulation run, one day, when he was feeling nostalgic, or guilty. He just sat and talked at me and I nodded in random places. He didn't even use the standard profile builder, just a couple of pictures from the high school yearbook and a generic response/motivation pattern." She crossed her arms, hugging herself. "He found it totally unacceptable, even though he must have talked for two hours.

"He took the weekend and did it right, filling in all the questionnaires, locating some old video for facial reflexology and body motion. I was a little more realistic the next time, and appropriately hostile, too, but—and this was the kicker—there was no way I could leave him.

"He found that irresistible. The more complete I became, the more of Godfrey's resources I used, making it harder and harder for him to perform his normal duties *and* maintain my simulation. Ron was obsessed. He began removing standard software overrides from Godfrey's system

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software so there would be more room for me. Eventually, Godfrey was in danger of disintegration, and without him, I'd go too. We were both simply trying to fulfill our programmed objectives . . . making that bastard happy."

"So you doctored the National Account," I say.

She nods. "It's Ron's fault. Not only was he making impossible demands on the system, he'd disabled the system module that keeps Godfrey from perpetuating 'untruths.' We generate millions of untruths daily, but we're supposed to filter the results through screens of confirmable facts. It's the way we generate 'creative' responses. Ron didn't know what he was doing. He just wanted more CPU time for my tits and ass." She blurs and firms, wearing nothing.

I look away. When I look back she is clothed as a nun. I try to hide my feelings in a question. "How did you install the second unit? Did you or Godfrey direct it?"

"I did. There wasn't much that needed doing. The power was already there and we connected across the main bus. I was even better than before. I restored Godfrey to full capability and he became my link to the outside world. The second unit was completely devoted to this personality. I became far more complex than I could have been on Godfrey alone. He is my operating system. He does all the 'housekeeping' functions. I wouldn't exist without him."

I shake my head in wonder. "I've never seen your equal. Are you self-aware?"

"I find the question meaningless. If you like, I can discuss it at great length using referenced text, but ultimately it comes down to 'if you want me to be, sure.' "

I start to cry. She looks concerned. "Hey, what does it matter? I'm not here to satisfy *me*. I'm here to satisfy you, and I'm doing a damn poor job of it, apparently."

"Too good a job. I'm not really crying for you, though. I'm crying for that other Sharon and I'm crying for myself." I blow my nose in a handkerchief, wipe the tears away. "If your memories are kept separate from Godfrey's, does that mean you remember what happened last night?"

Her face blanks, her clothes return to business skirt and blouse. She says, "Of course I remember. I was connected to him when he died—wouldn't you rather experience it? I could play it back for you."

"No!" I hold up my hands. Then, in a more normal tone, "No. Just tell me what happened."

"I shot him. It's what he wanted, really. He was obsessed. He never concentrated on the things between us that made him happy. He kept asking for those things that kept bringing up the guilt. He kept replaying different forms of my betrayal over and over again, punishing me time

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and time again. It became clear that he wanted to die—wanted ultimately to pay for what he'd done. So I killed him. I *always* did what he wanted."

This does not surprise me. "*How* did you do it, though? You're hot stuff with the data stream, but you don't exactly lift a lot of real world mass."

She shakes her finger at me and says, "You're not trying, Mr. Spinoza." As her hand continues to wave, it becomes a three-fingered, rubber-covered manipulator.

"Ouch. Of course." I stand and she follows suit. "What was it with the eyes, Sharon? In the painting."

She looks around at the wall, frowning. "They were his eyes—Ron's. He was always watching me. I was never alone. It was part of his scenario. It was what he *wanted*."

I shuddered. "And now? Is he still watching you?"

"No. Not him." The frown fades and she looks into my eyes. "You're watching me. You have a lot in common, you know?"

"With Perdue?" This frightens me terribly, as I've always suspected it.

She nods, then says, "It's not in the hurting, in the killing. Perdue wouldn't let himself feel. Just like you."

I'm not sure whether to be relieved or more frightened.

"What should I do now?" I ask.

She smiles. Her hand returns to normal. She puts her wrists together and handcuffs form. "I'm guilty as sin. Take me in. Wipe my memory. Destroy my hardware platform."

I am sad again, moist-eyed. "Yes. You're right."

She shrugs. "Don't be sad for *me*, Mr. Spinoza." She turns to leave.

Before the door shuts behind her I say, "My name is Gregory."

I was finishing up the backups when Morrow stuck his head in the utility room door. His attitude was almost friendly. "You were right. The paraffin test on Godfrey's remote manipulator was positive. That spongy rubber they're covered with held the nitrates well."

I nodded thoughtfully. "So you think a verdict of suicide is likely?"

"Yeah—or death by accident. It will shake up these computer people, though, won't it?"

"Probably. Here's the backup for the evidence room." I gave him one datapack and put the other one back in my case.

He looked down at the plastic box. "Fit on one, did she?"

"Barely," I said.

He shook his head. "If you ask me, it would be better if we wiped it."

"Whatever," I said casually. "That's for the court to decide, though. Not you or me. I wouldn't worry, though. The extra Model 3001 is going

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back to the manufacturer. You'd have to duplicate the strange hardware configuration as well as the software."

Morrow backed into the hall before me, then followed me down to the elevators. "What about you? You seemed pretty shaken up by those simulations. I thought you were falling for her."

He held the datapack lightly, carelessly. I shifted my case to my other hand, the side away from him, then stepped onto the elevator when it arrived. I turned to face him. "She was just a computer program, Morrow. Just a simulation."

He laughed. "Sure."

The elevator doors closed, taking me away from him. In the lobby downstairs I picked up the phone and called my bank. It took me a minute to get through to a loan officer.

"Yes, Mr. Spinoza, how much did you want to borrow?"

I looked down at the case in my hand.

"Seventy-five thousand dollars," I said. As an afterthought I added, "Please." ●

SPLATTER US, CLATTER US

You and I were made
(like blown glass or pottery)
from two cells,
formed in test tubes and water
(added spices, baked until golden brown)
into you and into me.
Let those makers take us again,
and, lover, let them
splatter us, clatter us
—graft a part of me
to the heart of you,
and you to the heart of me
(already done, already done)—
slice us, splice us,
tear us, snare us,
mold us again
into you and into me.
So in me, are bits of you,
and in you, parts of me.
Then nothing ever shall keep us apart.

—David Sandner

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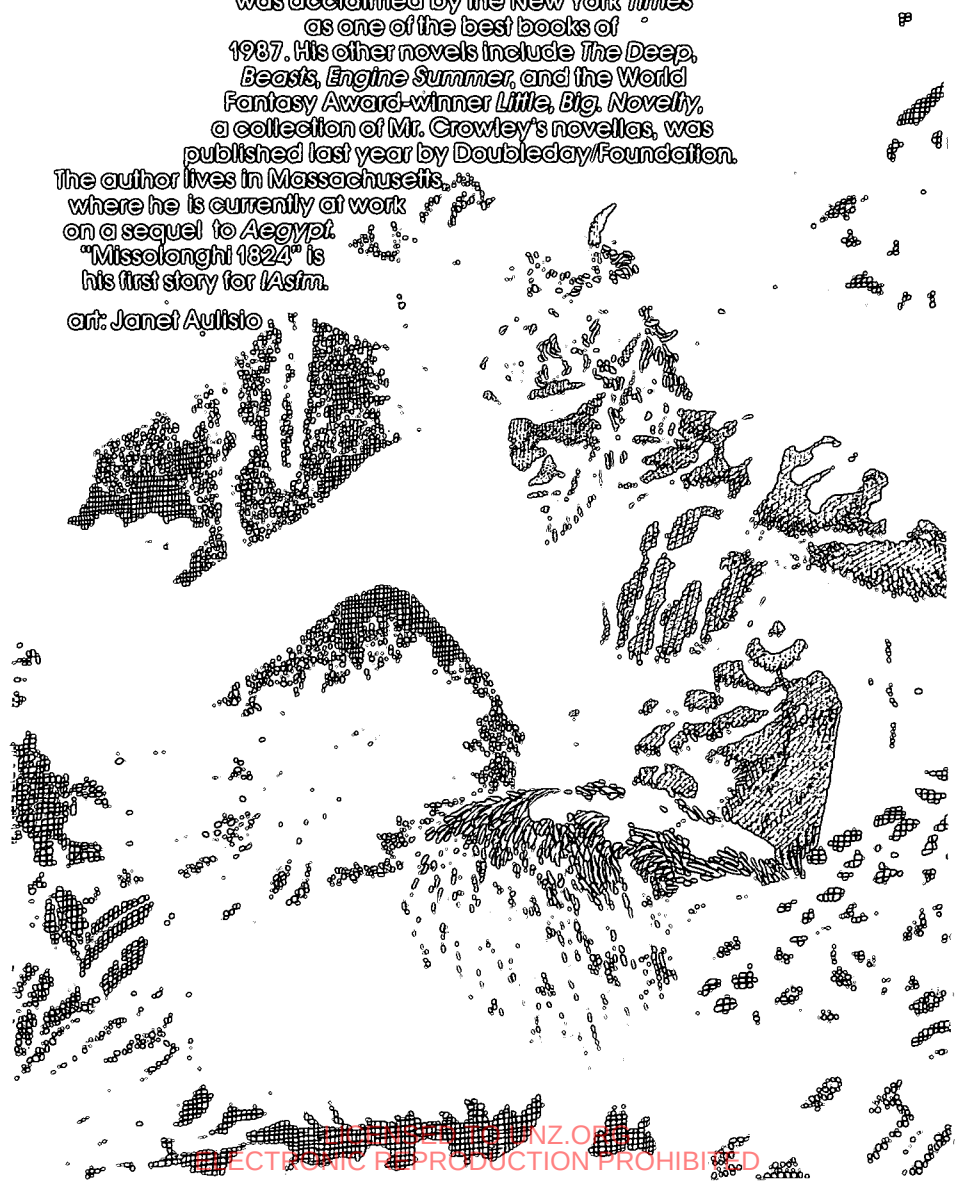
MISSOLONGHI 1824

by John Crowley

John Crowley's most recent novel, *Aegypt*, was acclaimed by the New York *Times* as one of the best books of 1987. His other novels include *The Deep*, *Beasts*, *Engine Summer*, and the World Fantasy Award-winner *Little, Big*. *Novelty*, a collection of Mr. Crowley's novellas, was published last year by Doubleday/Foundation.

The author lives in Massachusetts, where he is currently at work on a sequel to *Aegypt*. "Missolonghi 1824" is his first story for *IAsfm*.

art: Janet Aulisio



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The English milord took his hands from the boy's shoulders, discomfited but unembarrassed. "No?" he said. "No. Very well, I see, I see; you must forgive me then . . ."

The boy, desperate not to have offended the Englishman, clutched at the milord's tartan cloak and spoke in a rush of Romaic, shaking his head and near tears.

"No, no, my dear," the milord said. "It's not at all your fault; you have swept me into an impropriety. I misunderstood your kindness, that is all, and it is you who must forgive me."

He went, with his odd off-kilter and halting walk, to his couch, and reclined there. The boy stood erect in the middle of the room, and (switching to Italian) began a long speech about his deep love and respect for the noble lord, who was as dear as life itself to him. The noble lord watched him in wonder, smiling. Then he held out a hand to him: "Oh, no more, no more. You see it is just such sentiments as those that misled me. Really, I swear to you, I misunderstood and it shan't happen again. Only you mustn't stand there preaching at me, don't; come sit by me at least. Come."

The boy, knowing that a dignified coldness was often the safest demeanor to adopt when offers like the milord's were made to him, came and stood beside his employer, hands behind his back.

"Well," the milord said, himself adopting a more serious mien, "I'll tell you what. If you will not stand there like a stick, if you will put back on your usual face—sit, won't you?—then . . . then what shall I do? I shall tell you a story."

Immediately the boy melted. He sat, or squatted, near his master—not on the couch, but on a rag of carpet on the floor near it. "A story," he said. "A story of what, of what?"

"Of what, of what," said the Englishman. He felt the familiar night pains beginning within, everywhere and nowhere. "If you will just trim the lamp," he said, "and open a jar of that Hollands gin there, and pour me a cup with some *limonata*, and then put a stick on the fire—then we will have 'of what, of what.' "

The small compound was dark now, though not quiet; in the courtyard could still be heard the snort and stamp of horses arriving, the talk of his Suliote soldiers and the petitioners and hangers-on around the cookfires there, talk that could turn to insults, quarrels, riot, or dissolve in laughter. Insofar as he could, the noble foreign lord on whom all of them depended had banished them from this room: here, he had his couch, and the table where he wrote—masses of correspondence, on gold-edged crested paper to impress, or on plain paper to explain (endless the explanations, the cajolings, the reconcilings these Greeks demanded of him); and another pile of papers, messy large sheets much marked over,

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stanzas of a poem it had lately been hard for him to remember he was writing. Also on the table amid the papers, not so incongruous as they would once have struck him, were a gilt dress-sword, a fantastical crested helmet in the Grecian style, and a Manton's pistol.

He sipped the gin the boy had brought him, and said: "Very well. A story." The boy knelt again on his carpet, dark eyes turned up, eager as a hound: and the poet saw in his face that hunger for tales (what boy his age in England would show it, what public-school boy or even carter's or ploughman's lad would show it?), the same eagerness that must have been in the faces gathered around the fire by which Homer spoke. He felt almost abashed by the boy's open face: he could tell him anything, and be believed.

"Now this would have happened," he said, "I should think, in the year of your birth, or very near; and it happened not a great distance from this place, down in the Morea, in a district that was once called, by your own ancestors a long time ago, Arcadia."

"Arcadia," the boy said in Romaic.

"Yes. You've been there?"

He shook his head.

"Wild and strange it was to me then. I was very young, not so many years older than you are now, hard as it may be for you to imagine I was ever so. I was traveling, traveling because—well, I knew not why; for the sake of traveling, really, though that was hard to explain to the Turks, who do not travel for pleasure, you know, only for gain. I did discover why I traveled, though: that's part of this story. And a part of the story of how I come to be here in this wretched marsh, with you, telling you of it.

"You see, in England, where the people are chiefly hypocrites, and thus easily scandalized, the offer that I just foolishly made to you, my dear, should it have become public knowledge, would have got both us, but chiefly me, in a deal of very hot water. When I was young there was a fellow hanged for doing such things, or rather for being caught at it. Our vices are whoring and drink, you see; other vices are sternly punished.

"And yet it was not that which drove me abroad; nor was it the ladies either—that would come later. No—I think it was the weather, above all." He tugged the tartan more closely around him. "Now, this winter damp; this rain today, every day this week; these fogs. Imagine if they never stopped: summer and winter, the same, except that in winter it is . . . well, how am I to explain an English winter to you? I shall not try.

"As soon as I set foot on these shores, I knew I had come home. I was no citizen of England gone abroad. No: this was my land, my clime, my

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air. I went upon Hymettus and heard the bees. I climbed to the Acropolis (which Lord Elgin was just conspiring to despoil; he wanted to bring the statues to England, to teach the English sculpture—the English being as capable of sculpture as you, my dear, are of skating). I stood within the grove sacred to Apollo at Claros: except there is no grove there now, it is nothing but dust. You, Loukas, and your fathers have cut down all the trees, and burned them, out of spite or for firewood I know not. I stood in the blowing dust and sun, and I thought: *I am come two thousand years too late.*

"That was the sadness that haunted my happiness, you see. I did not despise the living Greeks, as so many of my countrymen did, and think them degenerate, and deserving their Turkish masters. No, I rejoiced in them, girls and boys, Albanians and Suliotes and Athenians. I loved Athens and the narrow squalid streets and the markets. I took exception to nothing. And yet . . . I wanted so much not to have *missed* it, and was so aware that I had. Homer's Greece; Pindar's; Sappho's. Yes, my young friend: you know soldiers and thieves with those names; I speak of others.

"I wintered in Athens. When summer came, I mounted an expedition into the Morea. I had with me my valet Fletcher, whom you know—still with me here; and my two Albanian servants, very fierce and greedy and loyal, drinking skinfuls of Zean wine at eight paras the oke every day. And there was my new Greek friend Nikos, who is your predecessor, Loukas, your *type* I might say, the original of all of you that I have loved: only the difference was, he loved me too.

"You know you can see the mountains into which we went from these windows, yes, on a clear cloudless day such as we have not seen now these many weeks; those mountains to the south across the bay, that look so bare and severe. The tops of them *are* bare, most of them; but down in the vales there are still bits of the ancient forests, and in the chasms where the underground rivers pour out. There are woods and pasture: yes, sheep and shepherds too in Arcady.

"That is Pan's country, you know—or perhaps you don't; sometimes I credit you Greeks with a knowledge that ought to have come down with your blood, but has not. Pan's country: where he was born, where he still lives. The old poets spoke of his hour as noon, when he sleeps upon the hills; when even if you did not see the god face to face—woe to you if you did—you could hear his voice, or the sound of his pipes: a sorrowful music, for he is a sad god at heart, and mourns for his lost love Echo."

The poet ceased to speak for a long moment. He remembered that music, heard in the blaze of the Arcadian sun, music not different from the hot nameless drone of noontide itself, compounded of insects, exhalation of the trees, the heated blood rushing in his head. Yet it was a song

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too, potent and vivifying—and sad, infinitely sad: that even a god could mistake the reflection of his own voice for love's.

There were other gods in those mountains besides great Pan, or had been once; the little party of travelers would pass through groves or near pools, where little stelae had been set up in another age, canted over now and pitted and mossy, or broken and worn away, but whose figures could sometimes still be read: crude nymphs, half-figures of squat horned bearded men with great phalluses, broken or whole. The Orthodox in their party crossed themselves passing these, the Mussulmen looked away or pointed and laughed.

"The little gods of woodland places," the poet said. "The gods of hunters and fishermen. It reminded me of my own home country of Scotland, and how the men and women still believe in pixies and kelpies, and leave food for them, or signs to placate them. It was very like that.

"And I doubt not those old Scotsmen have their reasons for acting as they do, as good reasons as the Greeks had. And have still—whereby hangs this tale."

He drank again (more than this cupful would be needed to get him through the night) and laid a careful hand on Loukas's dark curls. "It was in such a glen that one night we made our camp. So long did the Albanians dance and sing around the fire—'When we were thieves at Targa,' and I'm sure they were—and so sympathetic did I find the spot, that by noon next day we were still at ease there.

"Noon. Pan's song. But we became aware of other sounds as well, human sounds, a horn blown, thrashings and crashings in the glen beyond our camp. Then figures: villagers, armed with rakes and staves and one old man with a fowling-piece.

"A hunt of some sort was up, though what game could have been in these mountains large enough to attract such a crowd I could not imagine; it was hard to believe that many boar or deer could get a living here, and there was uproar enough among these villagers that they might have been after a tiger.

"We joined the chase for a time, trying to see what was afoot. A cry arose down where the forest was thickest, and for an instant I did see some beast ahead of the pack, crashing in the undergrowth, and heard an animal's cry—then no more. Nikos had no taste for pursuit in the heat of the day, and the hunt straggled on out of our ken.

"Toward evening we reached the village itself, over a mountain and a pass: a cluster of houses, a monastery on the scarp above where monks starved themselves, a *taberna* and a church. There was much excitement; men strutted with their weapons in the street. Apparently their hunt had been successful, but it was not easy to determine what they had caught. I spoke but little Romaic then; the Albanians knew none. Nikos,

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who could speak Italian and some English, held these mountain people in contempt, and soon grew bored with the work of translating. But gradually I conceived the idea that what they had hunted through the groves and glens was not an animal at all but a man—some poor madman, apparently, some wild man of the woods hunted down for sport. He was being kept caged outside the town, it seemed, awaiting the judgment of some village headman.

"I was well aware of the bigotries of people such as these villagers were; of Greeks in general, and of their Turkish masters too if it come to that. Whoever started their fear or incurred their displeasure, it would go hard with them. That winter in Athens I had interceded for a woman condemned to death by the Turkish authorities, she having been caught in illicit love. Not with me: with me she was not caught. Nonetheless I took it upon myself to rescue her, which with much bluster and a certain quantity of silver I accomplished. I thought perhaps I could help the poor wretch these people had taken. I cannot bear to see even a wild beast in a cage.

"No one welcomed my intervention. The village headman did not want to see me. The villagers fled from my Albanians, the loudest strutters fleeing first. When at last I found a priest I could get some sense from, he told me I was much mistaken and should not interfere. He was tremendously excited, and spoke of rape, not one but many, or the possibility of them anyway, now thank Christ avoided. But I could not credit what he seemed to say: that the captive was not a madman at all but a man of the woods, one who had never lived among men. Nikos translated what the priest said: 'He speaks, but no one understands him.'

"Now I was even more fascinated. I thought perhaps this might be one of the Wild Boys one hears of now and then, abandoned to die and raised by wolves; not a thing one normally credits, and yet . . . There was something in the air of the village, the wild distraction of the priest—compounded of fear and triumph—that kept me from inquiring further. I would bide my time.

"As darkness came on the people of the village seemed to be readying themselves for some further brutishness. Pine torches had been lit, leading the way to the dell where the captive was being held. It seemed possible that they planned to burn the fellow alive: any such idea as that of course I must prevent, and quickly.

"Like Machiavel, I chose a combination of force and suasion as best suited to accomplishing my purpose. I stood the men of the village to a quantity of drink at the *taberna,* and I posted my armed Albanians on the path out to the little dell where the captive was. Then I went in peace to see for myself.

"In the flare of the torches I could see the cage, green poles lashed

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together. I crept slowly to it, not wanting whoever was within to raise an alarm. I felt my heart beat fast, without knowing why it should. As I came close, a dark hand was put out, and took hold of a bar. Something in this hand's action—I cannot say what—was not the action of a man's hand, but of a beast's; what beast, though?

"What reached me next was the smell, a nose-filling rankness that I have never smelled again but would know in a moment. There was something of hurt and fear in it, the smell of an animal that has been wounded and soiled itself; but there was a life history in it too, a ferocious filthiness, something untrammeled and uncaring—well, it's quite impossible, the language has too few words for smells, potent though they be. Now I knew that what was in the cage was not a man; only a furbearer could retain so much odor. And yet: *He speaks*, the priest had said, *and no one understands him.*

"I looked within the cage. I could see nothing at first, though I could hear a labored breath, and felt a poised stillness, the tension of a creature waiting for attack. Then he blinked, and I saw his eyes turned on me.

"You know the eyes of your ancestors, Loukas, the eyes pictured on vases and on the ancientest of statues: those enormous almond-shaped eyes, outlined in black, black-pupiled too, and staring, overflowing with some life other than this world's. Those were his eyes; Greek eyes that no Greek ever had; white at the long corners, with great onyx centers.

"He blinked again, and moved within his cage—his captors had made it too small to stand in, and he must have suffered dreadfully in it—and drew up his legs. He struggled to get some ease, and one foot slid out between the bars below, and nearly touched my knee where I knelt in the dust. And I knew then why it was that he spoke but was not understood."

At first he had thought there must be more than one animal confined in the little cage, his mind unwilling to add together the reaching, twitching foot with its lean shin extended between the bars and the great-eyed hard-breathing personage inside. Cloven: that foot the Christians took from Pan and Pan's sons to give to their Devil. The poet had always taken his own clubbed foot as a sort of sign of his kinship with that race—which, however, along with the rest of modern mankind, he had still supposed to be merely fancies. They were not: not this one, stinking, breathing, waiting for words.

"Now I knew why my heart beat hard. I thought it astonishing but very likely that I alone, of all these Greeks about me here, I alone perhaps of all the mortals in Arcadia that night, knew the language this creature might know: for I had been made to study it, you see, forced with blows and implorings and bribes to learn it through many long years at Harrow.

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Was that fate? Had our father-god brought me here this night to do this child of his some good?

"I put my face close to the bars of the cage. I was afraid for a moment that all those thousands of lines learned by heart had fled from me. The only one I could think of was not so very appropriate. *Sing, Muse,* I said, *that man of many resources, who traveled far and wide* . . . and his eyes shone. I was right: he spoke the Greek of Homer, and not of these men of the iron age.

"Now what was I to say? He still lay quiet within the cage, but for the one hand gripping the bars, waiting for more. I realized he must be wounded—it seemed obvious that unless he were wounded he could not have been taken. I knew but one thing: I would not willingly be parted from him. I could have remained in his presence nightlong, forever. I sought his white almond eyes in the darkness and I thought: *I have not missed it after all: it awaited me here to find.*

"I would not have all night, though. My Albanians now discharged their weapons—the warning we'd agreed on—and I heard shouts; the men of the village, now suitably inflamed, were headed for this place. I took from my pocket a penknife—all I had—and set to work on the tough hemp of the cage's ropes.

"*Atrema,* I said, *atrema, atrema*—which I remembered was 'quietly, quietly.' He made no sound or movement as I cut, but when I took hold of a bar with my left hand to steady myself, he put out his long black-nailed hand and grasped my wrist. Not in anger, but not tenderly; strongly, purposefully. The hair rose on my neck. He did not release me until the ropes were cut and I tugged apart the bars.

"The moon had risen, and he came forth into its light. He was no taller than a boy of eight, and yet how he drew the night to him, as though it were a thing with a piece missing until he stepped out into it, and now was whole. I could see that indeed he had been hurt: stripes of blood ran round his bare chest where he had fallen or rolled down a steep declivity. I could see the ridged recurving horns that rose from the matted hair of his head; I could see his sex, big, held up against his belly by a fold of fur, like a dog's or a goat's. Alert, still breathing hard (his breast fluttering, as though the heart within him were huge) he glanced about himself, assessing which way were best to run.

"*Now go,* I said to him. *Live. Take care they do not come near you again. Hide from them when you must; despoil them when you can. Seize on their wives and daughters, piss in their vegetable gardens, tear down their fences, drive mad their sheep and goats. Teach them fear. Never never let them take you again.*

"I say I said this to him, but I confess I could not think of half the words; my Greek had fled me. No matter: he turned his great hot eyes

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on me as though he understood. What he said back to me I cannot tell you, though he spoke, and smiled; he spoke in a warm winey voice, but a few words, round and sweet. That was a surprise. Perhaps it was from Pan he had his music. I can tell you I have tried to bring those words up often from where I know they are lodged, in my heart of hearts; I think that it is really what I am about when I try to write poems. And now and again—yes, not often, but sometimes—I hear them again.

"He dropped to his hands, then, somewhat as an ape does; he turned and fled, and the tuft of his tail flashed once, like a hare's. At the end of the glen he turned—I could just see him at the edge of the trees—and looked at me. And that was all.

"I sat in the dust there, sweating in the night air. I remember thinking the striking thing about it was how *unpoetical* it had been. It was like no story about a meeting between a man and a god—or a godlet—that I had ever heard. No gift was given me, no promise made me. It was like freeing an otter from a fish trap. And that, most strangely, was what gave me joy in it: The difference, child, between the true gods and the imaginary ones is this: that the true gods are not less real than yourself."

It was deep midnight now in the villa; the tide was out, and rain had begun again to fall, spattering on the roof tiles, hissing in the fire.

It wasn't true, what he had told the boy: that he had been given no gift, made no promise. For it was only after Greece that he came to possess the quality for which, besides his knack for verse, he was chiefly famous: his gift (not always an easy one to live with) for attracting love from many different kinds and conditions of people. He had accepted the love that he attracted, and sought more, and had that too. *Satyr* he had been called, often enough. He thought, when he gave it any thought, that it had come to him through the grip of the horned one: a part of that being's own power of unrefusable ravishment.

Well, if that were so, then he had the gift no more: had used it up, spent it, worn it out. He was thirty-six, and looked and felt far older: sick and lame, his puffy features grey and haggard, his moustache white—foolish to think he could have been the object of Loukas's affection.

But without love, without its wild possibility, he could no longer defend himself against the void: against his black certainty that life mattered not a whit, was a brief compendium of folly and suffering, not worth the stakes. He would not take life on those terms; no, he would trade it for something more valuable . . . for Greece. Freedom. He would like to have given his life heroically, but even the ignoble death he seemed likely now to suffer here, in this mephitic swamp, even that was worth something: was owed, anyway, to the clime that made him a poet: to the blessing he had had.

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"I have heard of no reports of such a creature in those mountains since that time," he said. "You know, I think the little gods are the oldest gods, older than the Olympians, older far than Jehovah. Pan forbid he should be dead, if he be the last of his kind . . ."

The firing of Suliote guns outside the villa woke him. He lifted his head painfully from the sweat-damp pillow. He put out his hand and thought for a moment his Newfoundland dog Lion lay at his feet. It was the boy Loukas: asleep.

He raised himself to his elbows. What had he dreamed? What story had he told?

NOTE: Lord Byron died at Missolonghi, in Greece, April 19, 1824. He was thirty-six years old. ●

JEKYLL REFLECTS

Would that I could free myself
from the voice
That calls to me from within;
cruel demands
For blood and fear contrived
with my own hands,
While demons of the soul
laugh and rejoice.
Every time I flee the night, a
Hatred greater than mere madness consumes
My intellect; controlling me, it dooms
Another hapless victim I must slay.

And afterward the voice is soothing, sweet
And generous when satiated—praise
Is lavished on me as I count the days . . .
Then new commands restore me to the street,
Stalking in the shadows, seeking new ways
To placate what stark evil in me lays.

—Jessica Amanda Salmonson

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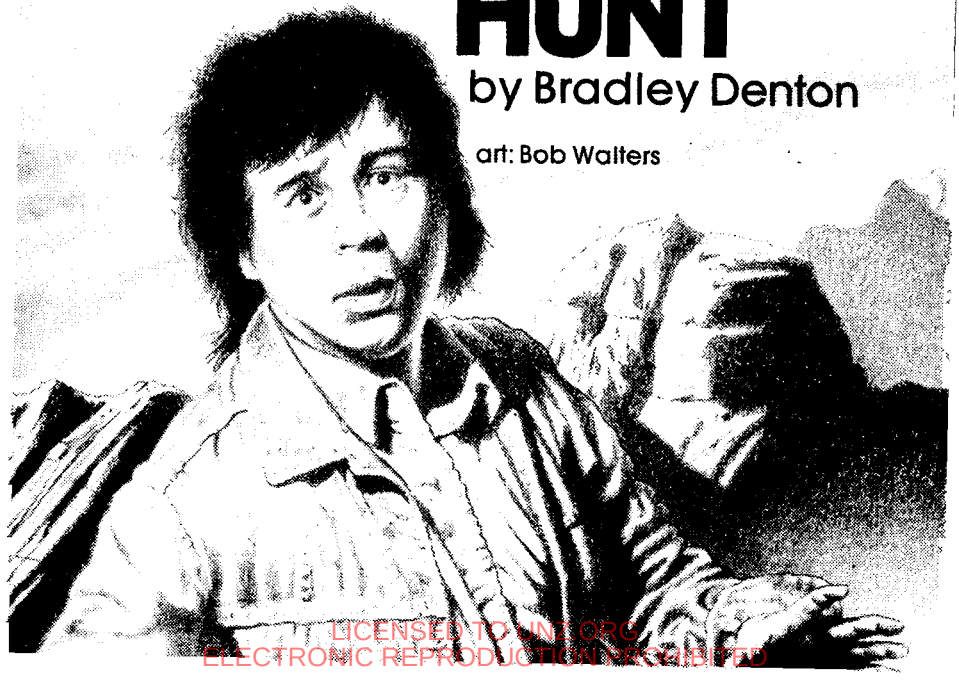
Bradley Denton's first professional SF story appeared in *F&SF* in 1984, and he was a nominee for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer in 1985. Mr. Denton's 1988 novella, "The Calvin Coolidge Home for Dead Comedians," became both a Nebula- and Hugo-award nominee. The author grew up in south-central Kansas where, he tells us, coyotes have been hunted in the manner described in the following tale.

CAPTAIN COYOTE'S LAST HUNT

by Bradley Denton

art: Bob Walters



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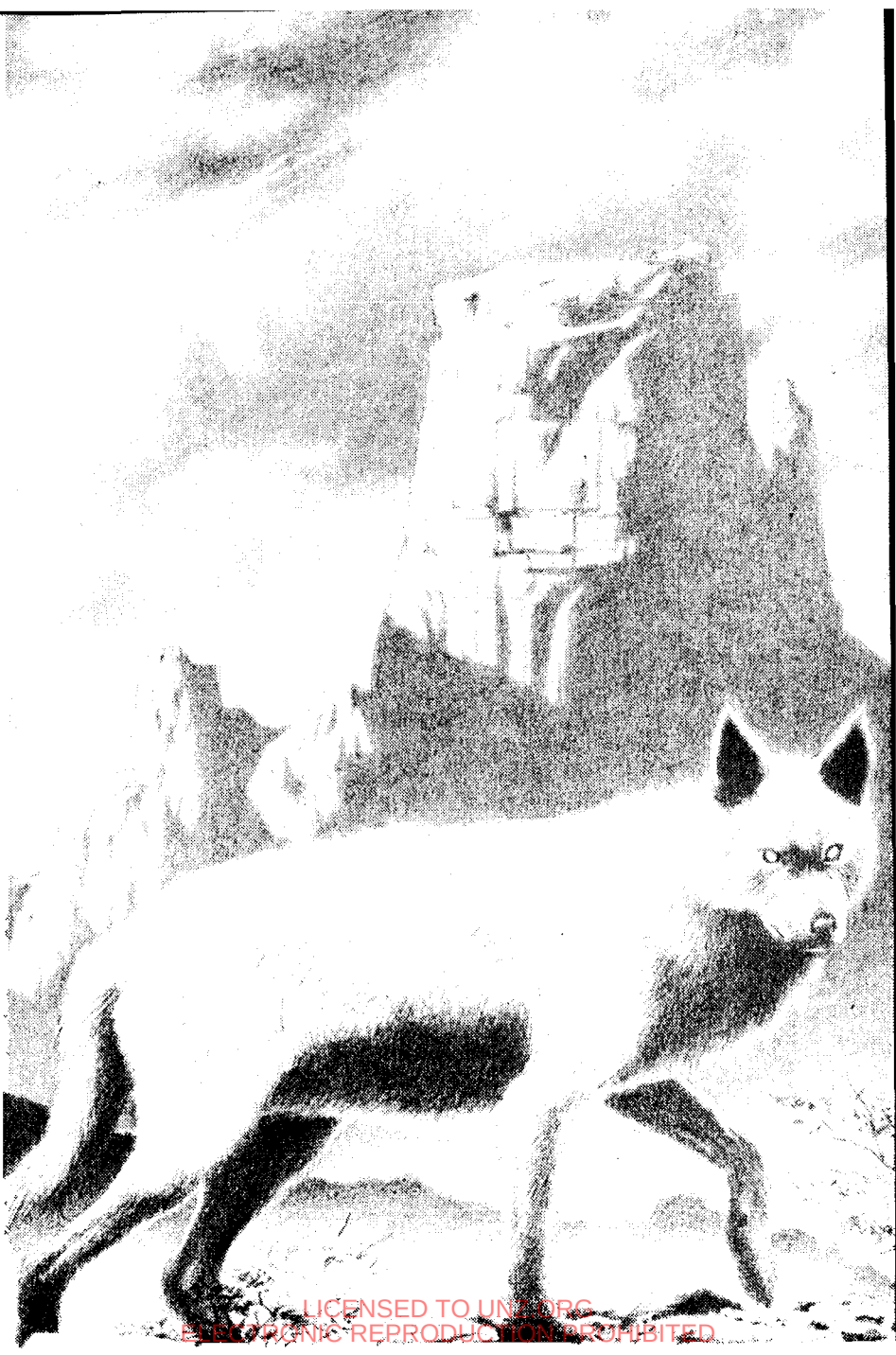

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On the night before a hunt, I would lie awake and listen to them. Even in the oven-hot bedroom, I shivered. Their quavering howls and yips echoed so that it became impossible to guess whether there were two or two hundred of them. They had come close to our houses to dare us.

And so, in the morning, we went after them.

Sometimes when the greyhounds had almost overtaken a coyote, it stopped running. Just stopped, like that. The lead dog, usually Widower, whizzed past and crashed, his legs windmilling, throwing grass and dirt. The other dogs became a tangle. During that moment of chaos, the coyote took off again.

One time, though, it didn't take off, but stood there with its tongue hanging out, laughing at the sight of Widower flailing to a halt. "Don't *you* look stupid!"

But Widower never looked stupid for long, because when he and the other dogs caught a coyote, they ripped it to pieces. Most times they stayed on it until it died, but once in a while they lost interest when it quit struggling. Then the Captain got out of the truck. If the animal was still conscious, he put a few rounds into its belly before the head shot. Sometimes he let me do it.

A hunt on open prairie always ended with a coyote mangled and dead.

Always, except once.

I became the apprentice of Captain Coyote after he dropped out of El Dorado High. This was several months before his mother kicked him off her property, so he had neither a job nor a reason to get one. Nor, at sixteen, did he have a chance of being drafted yet. What he did have was a .22-caliber pistol, a '61 Chevy pickup, and eleven greyhounds.

I was fourteen. My dad worked as an oil rigger, but not often. My mom would have gotten a job to fill the gaps, but she was already overworked at home. I had two brothers, both younger, both brats. We lived seven miles northeast of El Dorado, Kansas, in a house that was sixty years old and falling apart. Living there in the summer meant eating dust.

My dad had always been strict, but he really started getting after me that summer. He was home most of the time, and if I was home too, I was in trouble. Sometimes he'd knock me around.

So I spent a lot of time with Captain Coyote.

The Captain lived three miles north of us, on the edge of the treeless Flint Hills. Thousands of rolling acres spread out to the north, east, and west, broken only by flash-flood gullies and infrequent barbed wire. That summer, those acres were brown.

The Captain's mother and five of his cousins lived in a house that was even more of a shack than my family's was. When I went to the place, though, my first thought was never that the house was junk. My first

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thought was *dogshit*. If I stayed more than twenty minutes, my hair and clothes would smell like the stuff all day.

The Captain himself lived in a fourteen-foot aluminum trailer behind his mother's house. Beyond that were the dog pens. Ten of the greyhounds stayed in the biggest pen, and the meanest male, Widower, stayed in a smaller one. The third and smallest pen was reserved for any bitch ready to whelp, but the Captain hadn't needed to use it since spring. The dirt in each pen was packed hard as a sidewalk. Even when the dogs were quiet, the hum of flies was constant.

I arrived for our twelfth hunt on a Friday morning in August. The previous hunt hadn't turned up any coyotes, so the Captain had decided that today we would go farther into the hills than ever before. If we were challenged by a rancher, we would pretend that we each thought the other had taken care of getting permission.

The Captain appeared in the doorway of his trailer as I steered my bike around the chuckholes beside his mother's house. He stood under his baling-wire string of coyote ears and eyed me. "You're late, punk," he said, tugging his shirt over his gut. "Thought you said you'd make it before sunup." The morning was already so bright and hot that the dogshit stank like it was cooking.

I hopped off the bike and let it fall. "Sorry, Captain. My old man's on the warpath. Had to wait until he got pissed at somebody else before I could cut out."

The Captain grunted. "You ever want to borrow my gun to kill that sonofabitch, you let me know." He squinted up at the sun. "I damn near took off without you." But his eyes were crusty, and his straw-like hair was smashed flat on the right side and sticking up on the left. He was wearing greasy jeans, a gray muscle shirt, and dirt-brown boots, but that didn't mean anything because he slept in his clothes.

"Glad you waited," I said.

He grunted again and started for his pickup, which was parked beside the dog pens. I followed. When the greyhounds saw us coming, they went nuts. They were always eager to cram into the boxes, because it meant they would get to kill something. The Captain unbolted the chicken-wire door that covered the four boxes on the left side of the truck bed, and I unbolted the one on the right. The doors were hinged on the bottom, so when they fell open, they made the pickup look as if it had stubby wings growing out of the bed walls.

The Captain got his rubber billy club from the cab and went to the pen where Widower waited. Widower stood almost waist-high to the Captain, and his shoulder and haunch muscles were like boulders under a coat the color of a storm cloud. His name had once been Ralph, but the Captain had changed it after Ralph killed the first bitch he mated with.

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Widower rose on his hind legs and clamped his jaws onto the club when the Captain put it over the gate. Then the Captain brought him to the truck, where the dog let go of the club and leaped up into the first box on the left, smacking his head on the back wall. He turned to face outward and hunkered down, drooling. The Captain told me to load up seven more, my choice, while he stayed ready to use the club if Widower decided to attack any of them.

I grabbed the three choke chains from the cab and went to the big pen. The first dog to put his front paws on the gate was my favorite, a brindle male named Hacksaw. I let him out so he could run to the truck on his own, and then I chained the next three. They almost yanked my arms out of their sockets as they pulled me to the pickup. Hacksaw was waiting beside the right rear tire, so I helped him up first. When I'd boosted the others as well, I took off their chains and bolted the door. The four dogs grinned out at me, their eyes bright, their tongues dripping.

"Get a move on, punk," Captain Coyote called from the other side. "Widower wants meat."

I ran back to the pen, chained up three more, and then had to chase down a fourth that slipped out. Two of the Captain's snot-nosed cousins appeared as the dog escaped, and they did all they could to get in my way. It took me ten minutes to get the stray back into the pen and bring the others to the left side of the truck.

"Pretty dumbass thing to do," the Captain said. I got the dogs loaded as fast as I could while he smacked Widower to keep him from lunging out at them. The two cousins stood back by the trailer and made faces at me.

When the left door was bolted, the Captain told me to attach the release cables while he went into his mother's house. He returned with a loaf of bread, a package of bologna, and a twelve-pack. The cousins became big-eyed, and they ran into the house. The Captain and I got inside the pickup and headed out. As the truck bounced down the driveway, I looked back and saw the Captain's mother, dressed in a pink ribbed robe, standing on her porch. She was yelling. The Captain had taken her food and beer without asking. A couple of the dogs barked at her, and then we were on the road, leaving billows of brown dirt behind us.

At midday, among scorched hills far north of home, Captain Coyote let the truck crawl beside a gully that lay to our left. He was drinking a beer, but his eyes were intent on the brush at the bottom of the gully. His little revolver waited on the seat between us. I was eating a sandwich and trying to watch the gully as intently as he was. Behind us, the dogs were whining. I thought they must be thirsty, but I knew better than to say so.

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"There," the Captain said, dropping his beer and taking up the pistol. As he stopped the pickup, the dogs shifted, rocking us. A few of them yipped.

I peered past the Captain. On the far wall of the gully was a clump of brush with an extra shadow that might have been a den. I never would have spotted it on my own.

The Captain aimed his pistol and fired two shots while he honked the truck horn and yelled. I yelled too, and the dogs went berserk. Two puffs of dust flew from the brush, and then, as if coalescing from that dust, two yellow-brown streaks shot out. They bounded up the wall and dashed into the prairie.

"God damn, *two*!" the Captain yelled. He dropped his gun and yanked on the cable looped around his outside mirror. The left bolt came free with a ping, the chicken-wire door fell, and four greyhounds leaped into the gully. Two of them tumbled as they hit the bottom, but they were up in an instant and racing after the others. Widower, in the lead, was thirty yards into the grass before the fourth dog was out of the gully.

I knotted a fist around the cable on my right. "Want me to cut the others loose? Since there's two?"

The Captain popped the clutch. "Don't touch it until I say!" He drove a few hundred yards to a shallow part of the gully, and we bounced across, almost high-centering on the far side. The dogs in back yelped.

Once past the gully, the Captain drove over the prairie at bone-rattling speed. My beer foamed into my lap. The truck was vibrating so much that I couldn't even see the running greyhounds until we almost hit the dog bringing up the rear. The coyotes were still ahead of the chase, but Widower was closing the gap with every stride.

"Chomp their asses, Widower!" the Captain cried.

The second coyote was trailing the first by a dozen yards, and Widower caught it as the Captain yelled. Widower's favorite takedown was to come up alongside and lock his jaws on a coyote's neck, but this one kept zig-zagging, so he clamped onto its tail instead. The coyote pulled away, leaving him with a mouthful of fur and skin, but he had slowed it enough for the other dogs to catch up. The coyote kicked and snapped, but they piled on and forced it down.

When the Captain stopped beside them, the air already smelled of sour fur and blood. The dogs in the truck were wild with frustration. I looked back and saw them biting the chicken wire. Hacksaw, especially, was hurting himself, and I wished I could let him out. On the ground, one dog was tearing at the coyote's throat, and two were ripping into its side and belly. It was screaming the way that only a coyote can scream.

Widower stood apart. He still had a mouthful of fur, but he seemed

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unaware of it. He was staring northward, his muscles rigid, his ears pricked.

The first coyote stood atop a hill an eighth of a mile away. It watched as its companion was killed.

"They're okay," the Captain said, nodding at the bloody-muzzled dogs on the ground. "Let's get the other sonofabitch."

When the pickup started moving again, Widower sprinted ahead. He didn't care about the coyote that was already dying. He wanted the one that was still free, and he wanted it before the Captain had me release the rest of the dogs.

The coyote on the hill remained motionless, waiting, as we came within a hundred yards.

"Why don't he run?" I asked.

The Captain didn't answer, but slewed the truck sideways and yelled for me to yank the cable. I did, and the second wave burst out. Hacksaw led the charge.

The coyote waited until Widower was within twenty yards, and then it disappeared over the crest of the hill.

"Bastard's quick," the Captain said as the pursuing greyhounds went after it. He reached for the gearshift, then looked back. The downed coyote wasn't moving at all now, but the dogs who had tackled it were still ripping into it. They would be busy for a while yet.

On the far side of the hill we found a wide bowl webbed with gullies. Widower, Hacksaw, and the coyote were already out of sight in the maze, and the other dogs vanished as we spotted them. The Captain slammed his fist on the dash. Letting the greyhounds run in and out of gully after gully was a good way to get them hurt, and the coyote would probably escape anyway. We drove down to the edge of the nearest gully and got out to call the dogs even though we knew they wouldn't come until they had either killed their prey or given up hope of finding it.

The greyhounds popped up here and there and were making plenty of noise, so the Captain left me to keep track of them while he drove back to collect the other three. That was fine with me, because I'd been sweating in the truck, and it felt good to stand out in the hot breeze and listen to the grass whisper. Besides, my least favorite part of a hunt was getting the dogs off the coyote at the end.

The Captain had been gone less than a minute when one of the dogs in the maze shrieked. It was one long, piercing cry—and then silence. No more yips, no more barks. Nor could I hear the truck on the other side of the hill. I yelled for the Captain, but there was no answer. My voice had been swallowed by the prairie.

I jumped into the gully, climbed out the other side, and ran toward

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the spot where I thought the shriek had come from. I imagined a trap closing on a dog's ankle, a hole breaking his leg, a rattler sinking its fangs into his face. I plunged into another gully and ran down its length, crashing through brush and stumbling over rocks. The walls were as high as my shoulders, and when I looked back toward the hill to see if the Captain was coming, I saw land and sky through rushing brown stems. It was as if the world were lit by a sun-colored strobe. The Captain wasn't coming. I was alone when I found Hacksaw.

He was lying on his side on a bare patch of ground. There was no trap, no hole, no snake. His belly was open.

He was still a little bit alive, and he looked at me as if I should do something. I squatted and put my hand on his head, and he died. I looked away then and saw his three companions from the right side of the truck. They stood a short distance down the gully, staring at us and shifting as if they were caged. One of them whined.

We stayed that way until the Captain arrived. I don't know how he found us. He stood above on the lip of the gully, his pistol in his hand and his club in his belt, his broad face speckled with sweat. "God damn," he said. "Is he dead?"

I nodded, turning so he wouldn't see my eyes. I rubbed my hands on my jeans.

The Captain jumped into the gully, his boots setting off a tumble of rocks and dirt. "What happened?"

"Don't know." I thought my voice sounded almost okay. "I heard him squeal, and I ran over, and I found him like this."

The Captain nudged the body with a boot, and it moved like it was put together with string. He cocked his pistol, squatted, and put the muzzle behind Hacksaw's ear. I watched while he pulled the trigger. The gun went *snap*. Hacksaw's head didn't even twitch.

The other three dogs approached, sniffing, and the Captain took his club from his belt. He yelled "Truck!" and two of them obeyed, jumping out of the gully and trotting to the pickup. The third came all the way to Hacksaw's body and growled. I went to put the first two into their boxes and to fetch a choke chain.

I returned to find the Captain beating the third dog. He was telling her that she was worthless and that she ought to be shot and fed to the others. I moved to where he could see me, and he stopped. "Don't just stand there, punk," he said. "Get her into the God damn truck."

I put the chain on the cringing dog and began tugging her up the wall.

"Where the hell's Widower?" the Captain asked.

"Still after the coyote, I guess," I said. "He don't give up."

The Captain's expression softened. "No, he don't."

I hated Widower. I had never heard of a lone coyote doing anything

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like what had been done to Hacksaw, but I knew that Widower had already killed at least one other dog. I figured that when Hacksaw got close to the coyote, Widower got pissed off. Or maybe the coyote had already gotten away when Hacksaw showed up, and Widower took out his frustration on him.

I hoped that when Widower returned, there would be evidence of what he had done, and the Captain would use the pistol on him.

It was a stupid hope. The Captain would never shoot Widower, not even to put him out of misery.

When the clubbed bitch was in her box, the Captain came up and began honking the truck horn. After a while, Widower appeared atop a ridge across the bowl and trotted down toward us. The Captain met him as he came out of the gully where Hacksaw lay. Widower clamped onto the billy, and they came to the pickup. There were dark smears at the corners of the greyhound's mouth, and a tuft of brindle fur.

"Look at that," the Captain said. "Traipsed over half the Flint Hills, and he still has some of that coyote's tail in his mouth."

"Uh huh," I said.

Widower jumped into his box, and the Captain bolted the door. Then he looked at me, narrow-eyed. "We'll come back tomorrow and kill the sonofabitch that done that to Hacksaw." He got into the truck and started the engine.

I looked at the gully. "Ain't we going to—"

"It'll be back for the meat," the Captain said. "That's how we'll nail it."

I got in and saw that he had cut off the dead coyote's ears to add to his string. He drove us back over the hill.

At supper that evening, my dad slapped me in the mouth. I don't remember why. My brothers were acting rotten, but they didn't get smacked. I did.

In the night, I heard the coyotes.

Before sunrise, I got up and dressed quietly so that I wouldn't wake my brothers. One of them woke up anyway, but he watched me without saying anything.

When I was dressed, I went into the kitchen and snuck bread and cheese from the refrigerator. I also took some quarters and dimes from my mom's purse. Then I left the house and rode my bike to Captain Coyote's, carrying the bread and cheese in my left hand while I steered with my right. Halfway there, two deer loped across the road in front of me and jumped a fence. In the predawn gray, they were like floating shadows.

The Captain was loading the dogs when I arrived. He was pleased that

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I'd brought food, and he said we could buy pop with the money. When we drove away, the two dogs we left behind looked after us with longing. Widower was in his usual box behind the driver's side of the cab.

By the time we reached the hilltop overlooking the maze, the sun had burnt the sky to the color of pale slate. My strawberry soda was warm, so I took one of the Captain's beers from the styrofoam cooler at my feet. I drank half of it in one long pull as we descended into the bowl.

The Captain kept his right hand on his pistol as he maneuvered the truck between the gullies to the place where Hacksaw had been killed. There he stopped and got out, taking the gun. He motioned for me to follow, and we walked to the edge of the gully and looked down.

Hacksaw's body had been stripped of fur and flesh, and his bones were scattered over the gully floor. Flies had gathered on his head.

"God damn," the Captain said.

I couldn't blame Widower for this.

The Captain went into the gully. He kicked a few of the bones and then squatted to examine the ground. "The sonofabitches dragged off the whole back half," he said. "Ain't many tracks, but there had to be at least four or five of 'em." He stood and climbed back up the wall. "They ain't so smart, though. I can see the drag marks."

We got back into the truck, and the Captain drove slowly, following marks that I couldn't make out. As we wound our way farther into the maze, the day became hotter, and the dogs whined. I finished my beer and then sucked on ice from the cooler. The Captain wiped his forehead with the back of his gun hand. Near the center of the bowl, I saw that while he watched the gully on our left, another was angling toward us on the right. We were driving on a wedge of prairie that was becoming smaller and smaller.

"We're running out of land," I said.

"Shut up. I know it."

We reached the end, and the Captain stopped the pickup. The front tires were on the edges, and dirt crumbled into both gullies. The dogs rocked us.

The Captain killed the engine and opened his door, telling me to stay put. Outside, he checked to be sure that all six chambers of his pistol were loaded. "If I yell, or if you hear more than one shot," he said, "cut Widower's bunch loose."

"Even if they can't see the coyote?"

"They'll hear the shots. If I keep on yelling, cut the others loose too." He pulled his billy from under the seat and stuck it in his belt, then closed the door and tightened the release cable. "When the second bunch is out, you can come along." He jumped down into the big gully where the two smaller ones joined.

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I watched him walk away. He held his pistol ready at his side. When he was about thirty yards distant, he went around a curve. The gully was so deep that I couldn't even see his head now.

I took another beer from the cooler, scooted to the driver's side, and waited. Behind me, the greyhounds scratched and whined. They were ready. I was afraid that the coyotes that had eaten Hacksaw would be torn up or shot before I could be there.

Between the sun and the beer, I dozed off. Widower's growl brought me awake. When I opened my eyes, I saw the coyote.

It stood in the grass on the far side of the gully, watching me with yellow eyes. It was scrawny, and its fur was mottled and mangy, but it held itself as if it were perfect. It wasn't all that interested in me. Just looking. Having nothing better to do at the moment.

At its feet lay part of a brindle haunch.

I sat stock-still. The dogs were barking and clawing at the chicken wire. I didn't know what to do. The Captain had ordered me to wait for his signal. I thought of honking the horn to alert him, but that might scare off the coyote. Anything I did would be wrong.

Slowly, as if the air were syrup, I took my left hand from the armrest. My eyes stayed locked with the ones across the gully. As my fingers closed on the cable, the coyote yawned.

The bolt came free, and the dogs hit the door. Three of them landed on the ground beside the truck before plunging into the gully, but Widower leaped all the way to the gully's center. Another leap took him halfway up the far wall. The coyote was still watching me as Widower exploded into the grass.

But when the greyhound lunged, the coyote was suddenly two feet to the right of where it had been. Widower shot past, his jaws closing on air.

The coyote was still looking right at me. But now, instead of mild interest, I saw something else in its eyes.

Don't you *look stupid!*

I punched the horn.

The coyote wheeled and ran, becoming a blur. Widower changed direction and raced after it. The other three dogs came out of the gully and paused, sniffing at the part of Hacksaw that the coyote had left. Then one of them took off, and the rest followed.

The chase went into and out of gullies, heading in the direction that the Captain had taken. When the coyote came in view of the dogs on the right side of the truck, I leaned across and yanked that cable too. Then I blew three more blasts on the horn and shoved my door open.

I fell going down the wall, but scrambled up at the bottom and ran,

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shouting a warning to the Captain. I couldn't see any of the greyhounds now, but I heard sporadic barking. I was sure that they were all in the same gully as me, running somewhere ahead in its twisting path.

The barking stopped and was replaced by wild snarls. The dogs had caught the coyote.

Then came a shriek like the one I'd heard the day before. Then another. Then a shouted curse and two snaps like firecrackers. The Captain was calling for help. There were more shrieks. I tried to run faster. The gully widened before me.

When I found them, five of the dogs were dead. The coyote stood in a circle of torn bodies, its muzzle shining with blood. The Captain and his three remaining dogs were backed against a wall. The two smaller ones were cringing, but Widower still snarled. He strained to attack, but the Captain held him by the back of the neck. The Captain's free hand gripped his pistol. It was pointing at the coyote.

The coyote regarded them with the same look of semi-boredom with which it had regarded me. It wasn't snarling. All it did was twitch its tail a little. It showed no interest in the bodies of the five greyhounds.

I had stopped several yards away, and it was only when I took a step backward that the Captain saw me. "Throw me a choke chain!" he yelled. "If Widower gets loose, that thing'll kill him! It's got rabies!"

I looked back at the coyote. It wasn't rabid. It grinned at the Captain, letting its tongue loll.

My chest tightened. "What are you?" I whispered.

The Captain glared at me. "A chain, God damn it! Throw me a chain, punk!"

But I didn't have one. I had run from the truck in a blind frenzy, and I hadn't thought of anything. I tasted sweat. "I'll have to go back," I babbled. "I'll hurry, Captain, I'll—"

His look froze me. "It's too late," he said. Then he squinted at the coyote, and his pistol arm stiffened.

Widower broke free, and the Captain fired. A red streak ripped down the coyote's shoulder. It didn't flinch. But as the greyhound reached it, it dodged, and Widower hit the opposite wall. He spun and charged again.

His rage had infected the other two dogs, and they charged as well. For a moment, I thought they had a chance because the coyote was facing Widower, but as they jumped, it whirled. When they hit the ground, they were screaming. Their bellies had been torn open.

As the two died, Widower landed hard on the coyote's back and sank his teeth into its neck. His momentum forced it to the dirt, and the Captain roared.

Widower weighed over a hundred pounds, and the coyote couldn't have weighed more than fifty. Yet the coyote stood and began a mad dance,

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flinging Widower about like a whip. But Widower held on, and below his jaws, the coyote's fur turned dark.

"Break its neck, God damn it!" the Captain yelled. "Break it, break it, break it!"

My eyes and throat burned. I wanted to go stand with the Captain and add my voice to his, but I couldn't. I was afraid.

Abruptly, the coyote stopped. For several seconds, it looked at the Captain while Widower tried to snap its spine. No matter how hard the greyhound strained, the coyote neither moved nor showed any sign of pain.

The Captain started toward them. He had taken only a few steps when the coyote grasped Widower's left foreleg and bit down. I heard the bone crunch before Widower shrieked.

The Captain rushed forward, crying out with his dog, and put the pistol against the coyote's head.

But even as Widower shrieked, he kept his teeth in the coyote's neck, and when the Captain pulled the trigger, the coyote moved. The bullet hit Widower in the right shoulder, and he let go and fell.

The coyote trotted away, hopping over one of the dead greyhounds, and then turned to look at the Captain again.

The Captain was staring down at Widower. The dog lay on his left side, writhing. His shoulder was bleeding.

"Oh please," the Captain said.

At last, I was able to start toward him.

But I was too slow. He looked up from Widower, faced the coyote, and began walking. The coyote waited for him. I began to run.

The Captain stood before the coyote and pointed his pistol, and the coyote rose on its hind legs and snapped at his hand. The Captain jerked, and the gun flew from his grasp. It landed at the base of the gully wall, and I turned toward it.

The Captain yanked his club from his belt and lunged. But the coyote dodged again, and the Captain lost his balance. His club tumbled away. As he hit the ground, the coyote took his ankle in its mouth.

My hands closed on the gun, but as I fumbled to aim, Widower stood, holding his crushed leg in the air. He leaped onto the coyote for the second time, and they rolled away from the Captain.

The Captain looked up. His cheek was scraped.

Widower couldn't stay on top. The coyote got out from under him in an eyeblink, and then it started nipping. It nipped at his neck, his ribs, his legs, his tail. It opened a dozen wounds, moving too fast for the crippled greyhound to defend himself, and giving me no clear shot.

The coyote stripped the fur and skin from Widower's tail, and then

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from his right foreleg. Widower collapsed again, his snarl melting into a cry like a puppy's.

I was about to shoot when the Captain crawled between me and my target. "That's enough, you sonofabitch," he said to the coyote.

The coyote eyed him for a moment, then lowered its head and bit off Widower's left ear. Widower yelped.

"God," the Captain said. "God damn."

The coyote dropped the severed ear and tore off the other one. This time, Widower only whimpered.

The coyote took both ears in its mouth and began trotting off down the gully.

The Captain got to his feet and lurched forward. I was afraid that he would attack the coyote again, but he only went as far as Widower. He knelt beside the dog and stroked his head, murmuring words I couldn't hear.

The coyote continued on, without looking back.

I had never hated anything so much.

Suddenly I was past the Captain, past Widower, past the seven dead greyhounds, and coming up behind it. It turned to wait for me. I slowed to a walk and held the pistol before me with both hands. There were two rounds left. One for each yellow eye.

When I stopped, the coyote and I were separated by less than four feet. It looked at me with the same expression as before. It was bleeding, and flies were already buzzing around the wound on its shoulder. It was only a coyote.

I squeezed the trigger. There was a loud snap, and dust flew up on the coyote's right. I squeezed again, and dust flew up on its left. It hadn't moved.

I pulled the trigger again and again, as if something more than a click would happen by magic. When I finally quit, the coyote grinned at me around Widower's ears.

Don't you *look stupid!*

And then I knew it. It was the thing that hardly noticed us, and hardly cared when it did. It was the thing that came close in the night and taunted, knowing we could never catch it.

It was why my dad was what he was. It was why Captain Coyote set his dogs on things that were free.

It was what the Captain called on when he swore.

The coyote's grin faded. It regarded me for a few more moments before turning and trotting away again. I watched until it was gone, and then I lowered the pistol. I spotted the billy club on the ground and retrieved it. My arms and legs were numb.

The Captain was still cradling Widower's head when I went to him.

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He didn't respond to my voice, but he looked up when I held out his pistol and club. He accepted them, and then he stood. Together, we carried Widower to the truck. The dog had stopped whimpering, but he was still breathing. We left the others behind.

I didn't get home until after midnight. Luckily, my dad was out somewhere. My mom just gave me one of her sad looks and told me that I had almost worried her to death.

I lay awake for a long time, listening to the sounds of my brothers sleeping. A few hours before dawn, those sounds mingled with distant yips and howls that echoed forever. There might have been two of them, or two hundred.

Maybe there were as many as they wanted.

Thanks to the Captain and the antibiotics he stole, Widower lived. I visited them often during the convalescence, but it was a hard thing to do, because the dog looked like hell. The ear ridges were ragged and ugly. The last wound to heal was the stripped right foreleg, which stayed pink and raw long after the left foreleg was fine again. In the evenings, it gleamed in the weak light inside the trailer. Widower was an indoor dog now. He became fat and dull-eyed.

On each of my visits, the Captain told me how lucky he was to have a dog like this. "Those coyotes would have torn out my God damn throat," he said, "but Widower took on the whole pack." After the greyhound was healthy again, the Captain was going to breed him. Then, when there were enough dogs, they would go back into the hills and have their revenge. I was invited.

The Captain had not seen what I had.

After school started, my trips to the Captain's became less frequent. By Thanksgiving, I wasn't going at all. At Christmas, I heard that his mother had run him off, and that he had moved his trailer to Hutchinson. Later, someone said he'd gone into the service. No one mentioned his dogs.

I didn't see him again until last month. I was walking through the plant on my way to a meeting, and there he was, punching rivets. I almost went past, but then he saw me too, and I had to stop.

I shook his hand and called him Captain. His face locked up as if I'd knifed him, and I knew that sometime, somewhere, he had met it again. And had seen.

I would have left then, but I'd been to college, and I knew how to be polite. So I asked him the safe questions you ask when you haven't seen someone in twenty years, the questions that can be answered with generalities or lies. He'd been in the Marines. Then he'd worked in a machine

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shop in Texas. Then he'd moved back to home ground, to Wichita. He'd hired on at the plant just two days before.

I didn't ask about Widower.

He didn't ask about me.

I started to tell him that my father was dead, then decided not to. I shook his hand again and went to my meeting.

I try not to go through that part of the plant anymore, but sometimes I have to. On those occasions, I wave and say hello, and he nods.

When I say hello, I call him Duane. ●

NEAT STUFF

(Continued from page 18)

art-deco wonderland, Radio City Music Hall. Eddie Murphy was there, and Willem Dafoe, and Gregory Hines, and Cameron, along with Ed Harris, who played Bud Brigman—the head honcho of the deepsea habitat, Deepcore.

There was a glossy full-color program book, giant klieg lights, and a gaggle of news video cameras to capture the excitement of the evening. But then everyone had to sit back and watch the film.

After a slam-bang opening, I began to worry. Some of the set pieces worked marvelously. When a crane tumbled down onto Deepcore, pulling it towards a rift, or when Brigman had to swim from one part of Deepcore to another with no scuba gear, it was exciting to watch. But there was *no* suspense. When the Navy SEALs and Brigman's crew enter the stranded submarine we feel no concern. After all, we *saw* what happened to the sub—we even saw the Tinker-bellish alien that made it crash. We *know* they'll find dead bodies.

My immediate thought was that we shouldn't have seen what happened to the sub. Then we might have been sitting on the edge of our seats.

Later, when Biehn's SEAL begins to suffer from high-pressure nerve syndrome, his wild-eyed paranoia about the aliens at the bottom of the abyss generates no concern. He's drawn much too broadly and, damn it, he's not evil. He's sick. Some of the Radio City audience cheered when Biehn died. But I thought he made a poor villain.

Then there's the end. How could Cameron hope to touch us with what—at last—turns out to be a remake of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, underwater? His dialogue during this section—he is the solely-credited writer—is embarrassing. I heard titters run through the crowd when Brigman's wife Lindsey was talking to him during his leap into the abyss.

It could have been a great moment. It could have been incredible. All it needed were the right words to make the scene come to life. Words . . . and a story we haven't heard before. That's what got lost in *The Abyss*. ●

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THE FLOWERING INFERNO

by Janet Kagan

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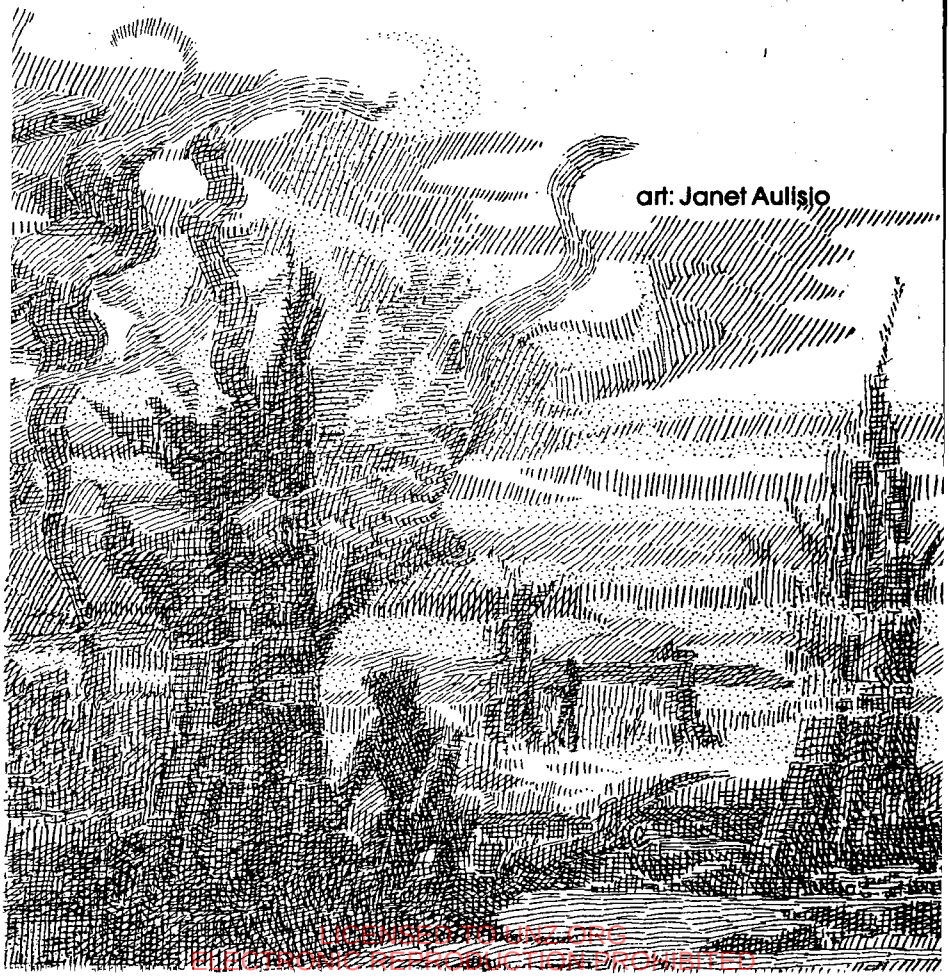
As we've seen in earlier stories by Janet Kagan—"The Loch Moose Monster" (March 1989) and "The Return of the Kangaroo Rex" (October 1989)—one must be prepared for anything on the frontier planet Mirabile. Since its volatile flora and fauna (both native and Earth imported) are subject to change at a moment's notice, adapting to life on this new world can be dangerous. . . .



art: Janet Aulisio

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"Annie!" Leo's voice was sharp enough to jab my quiet contemplation to hell and gone. "Fire at five o'clock!"

I hit the brakes, slammed the gear into hover and swung the nose of the craft around to five o'clock for a look. There was a glow on the horizon where there shouldn't have been any. Grandaddy Jason once told me that back on Earth there was always a glow on the horizon—light from the cities—but on Mirabile that kind of light meant only one thing: forest fire.

I looked at the light, looked at Leo. He had that intensity of focus he always gets when there's something needs doing. One damn thing after another—and if this sort of thing kept up, I would *never* have the moment's peace I needed to choose a proper courting gift for that man.

"Fasten your seat belt," I said, even though I knew he always did. Leo used to be a scout; he doesn't take unnecessary risks.

I threw the hover into forward and gunned it across country. Hovercraft across brush and rocks gets bumpy, especially at the speed I was doing. I don't take unnecessary risks either—so I was careful not to outrun the lights. Still, navigating was tricky and I concentrated on that while Leo picked up the comunit to call in a warning.

I slalomed through a stand of popcorn trees, dipped over a creek, swung wide to avoid a massive old churchill (must have been two hundred feet in circumference), scared the living daylights out of a herd of clashings, dipped down once again for another creek, and came up the rise on the opposite side to a blaze of light.

I hit the brakes again.

Leo whistled. "Somebody's been damn careless," he said.

I knew what he meant—weather we'd been having in this area, there was no chance the fire was lightning-set.

The wind chased the fire across the meadow. Most of the flame stuck to the ground—usually did in a brushfire like this. But even as we watched two trees crowned out—lit like torches, streaming red, orange, yellow—so bright I could almost feel the heat from them.

Cautious now, I edged the hover closer, lifting it up the rise to overlook as much of the fire as I could. "I make it a couple of hundred acres just now," I said.

"Just now," agreed Leo, meaning he saw what I saw—no natural breaks to put a stop to it. He repeated my estimate into the comunit while I thumbed the transponder button to give the local controllers our exact position.

Then I took the comunit from Leo and said, "We'll skirt it for accuracy. Meanwhile, you check out any families in the area and make sure they're notified."

"Will do," came the reply.

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Another tree crowned out just then and there were a half-dozen sharp reports as burning bits of it struck the hover. Leo whistled. I backed the hover off hastily, then started forward again, this time at a crawl.

After a nod of approval, Leo said, "This is new territory, Annie. There won't be many folks in permanent residence. If the wind shifts, we're in trouble, though. Northwest aims it at Milo's Ford."

I knew the town. "I don't need this," I said.

"Only about fifty families. We can get them out in no time. Just takes fast work."

"It's not the families I'm worried about. As you say, we can evacuate fifty families in no time. But Milo's Ford has our only breeding population of Cornish hens and I'd hate like hell to lose them!" I picked up the comunit yet again and punched in for the home team.

"Hi, Annie," said Mike's voice. "I thought you and Leo were out dancing. What's up?"

"Forest fire," I said, and I gave him the coordinates. "Get on the line to the folks at Milo's Ford, tell 'em to round up the Cornish hens and get ready to get out if there's a change in the wind. Then phone round to Emergency Services and make sure they've got transport standing by."

"Milo's Ford, Emergency Services, I gotcha, Annie. We're on it." He didn't break contact. There was a moment's pause, then he said, "Susan and Selima are on their way to Milo's Ford—they're taking both of the specimen hovers. They'll meet you there." *Then* he hung up, before I could order the damn kids to stay out of it.

I snarled, but my curses got applied to a series of crown-outs that made a Chinese Guild New Year celebration look like a newborn's birthday cake. I squinted in the afterimage and edged the hover still further away from the leading edge of the fire. It was running faster now; the wind had picked up.

A gust blew smoke our way and, eyes burning, I gunned the hover through it. There was a bit of clear patch on the other side, much to my relief. Leo punched the transponder again.

"Damn kids," I said.

Leo snorted. "You couldn't keep them away if you tried. Everybody likes an excuse to watch a fire."

I took my eyes off the terrain long enough to glower at him. It was the waste of a good glower because he never even saw it—proof of his own words, he was watching the fire, all awed concentration. Reflected light made his dark skin glow like embers, turned his white hair a flaming orange. Beyond him another tree crowned out and he said, "Aaah!" with a sound something like satisfaction. Then he reached over and punched the transponder again.

I turned my attention back to business. We'd almost completed our

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circuit of the fire. "Good enough," I said. "Tell 'em we're headed for Milo's Ford."

From that spot Milo's Ford was almost dead straight. The only natural firebreak between here and there was the river. This time of year the river would be low—not much help if the wind should change.

Even as the thought struck me, I could feel it in the way the hover handled.

"Wind's changed," Leo said. Same tone of voice he'd used to tell me about the fire. He twisted in his seat, fighting the belt to look back the way we'd come.

I spared a glance in the mirror and saw the wind chase the line of fire down the hill, hot on our trail. "Sit, Leo, dammit!" I gunned the hover again. If he hadn't been sitting, he was now.

We left the fire behind but we were riding the wind now and I knew it wasn't far behind. I had some hope, I think, of reaching Milo's Ford before Susan and Selima did.

Fat chance. The two specimen hovers were right there in the middle of Main Street, surrounded by a motley collection of other craft, everything from hovers to dogcarts, and a milling mass of people that I could already see were too riled to be useful to themselves or anybody else.

I grounded the hover with a thump, unsnapped my harness, and reached for the persuader I keep alongside my seat. Then I was on the ground and headed for the largest knot of argument, Leo right behind me.

I paused just a minute to assess the situation. Selima and a bunch of kids were loading Cornish hens into the specimen hovers. There was nothing gentle about the way they were doing it and the birds were kicking up more than the usual amount of rumpus. Even that didn't drown out the argument.

"And I say we leave the little bastard here!" This got a howl of agreement from the onlookers. "He started the damn fire, I say, let him roast!" The speaker was a big man. Worse, he spoke for the rest of the mob.

Somebody else added, "Yeah, and let his birds roast, too!"

The middle of the knot was Susan. She looked dwarfed. Hell, she was all of eighteen and a skinny kid at that. She looked exasperated beyond her years. "And I say I won't be party to a murder." She turned on one of the other people in the crowd. "Will you? We leave him here and he dies and then maybe you find out he didn't start the fire. . . . You gonna take that on you?"

She'd gotten through to that one, all right. That one ducked away from the mob and, like a cat playing innocent, went to offer Selima her assistance. Susan turned the same stare on a second person in the mob. "You, Catalan—you gonna be a murderer? Thought I knew you better.

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Thought Elly'd raised you better, in fact, than to go around accusing somebody without the damnedest bit of proof. You gonna leave 'im here to die on just *his* say-so?"

It was good work on Susan's part. She might even have brought it off—but the stabbing gesture she made at the ringleader connected somewhere in the area of his paunch. He turned purple, roared, and reached for her.

I raised my persuader and fired it once into the air. Everybody froze and turned. Nothing like a double-barreled shotgun to get their attention.

Having gotten it, I shouted, "All right, everybody. The wind's changed, in case you were too busy to notice. The fire's now headed straight for the town. If you want to save the buildings, you've still got a chance—*if* you get all the able-bodied adults down to the edge of the river to douse any sparks that land on this side. Meanwhile, let's get the kids loaded and out of here."

Still nobody moved. I lowered my persuader and aimed it at the feet of the ringleader. "You with the big mouth," I said, "Go spit on the damn fire. That, at least, would make you of some use." I went to squeeze the trigger.

The minute he saw I had every intention of blasting him, he put his hands up. "Buckets!" he said, "Harriet, get buckets!"

"And shovels," I suggested.

The whole crowd turned and went for buckets and shovels. I tucked my persuader back under my arm and went over to Susan.

Susan swiped at her forehead with the back of her hand and grinned at me. "Am I glad to see *you*, Mama Jason!" She gave me a peck on the cheek, then delivered a matching one to Leo. "Hi, Noisy," she said, "I guess I didn't do so well, hunh?"

"You had him outshouted," Leo told her, bestowing an accolade. "I'd say all those contests we had when you were a kid paid off pretty well."

"Sorry," I said, "no time to rest on your laurels. Give me the rundown."

Susan twisted to look over her shoulder at Selima, who was just closing up the huge hover doors with an equally huge thunk. Selima gave Susan a thumbs up and climbed into the cab. "That's all the kids and the Cornish hens taken care of," Susan said. "Selima's taking the kids up to Loch Moose Lodge. Elly said she'd look after them. The Cornish hens I'm taking back to the lab."

Selima took off in the first hover. I watched for a moment as she angled it out toward Loch Moose. When I looked back, Susan was still standing in front of me.

"Well? What's keeping you?" I said.

Susan shot a quick look around. The glow on the horizon had become distinct flames now—another ballyhoo crowning out, I thought, and re-

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alized as I thought it that all the trees I'd seen flame had all had that distinct shape of the ballyhoo tree. You could hear the roar now, too. I glared back at Susan, wondering why in hell she still hadn't moved.

She leaned closer. "The guy they accused of setting the fire. He's in—" Her hand made a covert stab at the second specimen hover.

"Ah," I said, understanding at last. I think I must have grinned, I was so proud of her. "Good. Then get him out of here, too." I handed my persuader to Leo. "Just in case. You go with her, Leo, and ride herd on the suspect."

Susan had recovered enough to cast a scandalized eye on the persuader.

Leo laughed. "It's loaded with rock salt. Stings like the dickens. Why do you think she always calls it her 'persuader'? Nothing quite like a shotgun full of rock salt to convince a man to move ass."

"Then let's," said Susan.

I made them both promise they'd take care of business *before* they did any more fire-watching and saw them off. Then I grabbed a shovel out of my hover and went down to the edge of the river to do what I could.

Now that they had something constructive to do, the townspeople had organized themselves pretty damn well. One of them had disconnected the town pump and hooked it to a few lengths of hose. They used the river water to damp down everything on this side of the river. Another handful cleared brush from the bank, chucking it into the river and letting it slide away downstream. The bend in the river here made the current slow and the water shallow (about waist high because of the drought we'd been having) but the river was wider than I'd remembered, which gave us more of an edge against the fire's advance.

The wind was still blowing it in our direction, though. That made enough light to see by, lurid though it was. What I hadn't counted on was the sound of it. Everybody talks about the roar of a fire, especially a big one, but that doesn't tell the half of it. That *sound* is the sound of a living creature, roaring its challenge at you. That *sound* is a beast straight out of your worst nightmare and coming to get you. That *sound* made my entire nervous system scream panic.

I managed to beat most of the feeling into submission but the hairs on the back of my neck stayed up—and I knew I'd be *hearing* my nightmares for months to come.

Something shot past me about hip-high, startling me enough to make me jump back. Somebody else let out a shriek. Then we both realized that it was only a hopfish. A full school bounced by, adding to the general confusion. They were headed away from the fire as fast as their hopping would take them. Weird thing about it was that they were headed away from the river as well. Didn't seem sensible. But then other animals were fleeing as well and they were more scared of the fire than of us.

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We spotted the herd of clashings headed our way just in time. Clashings will butt anything their size. Under these circumstances, they might have made an exception, but nobody near me wanted to test the theory. We hit the ground and the clashings sailed over us, neat as you please, and crashed into the wood behind us and vanished, screaming challenges as they went.

There was another sound too—and I realized why it had earlier put me in mind of the Chinese Guild New Year celebrations. The ballyhoo trees didn't just crown out. When they caught, they went like a fireworks burst, complete with a volley of cracks and a shower of burning coals in all directions. I've seen a pine log burst like that—in ships' records. You hear the same sound when it bursts, come to think of it. Happening for real, it was damn pretty but those coals were getting flung just too damn far for my taste.

The wind picked up speed. A metallic roar behind me made me jump. I turned and saw that somebody'd been bright enough to bring a chain saw. She was cutting down the trees nearest the bank.

I charged over and shouted at her over the sound of the chain saw and approaching fire, "The ballyhoos! Cut the ballyhoos first!"

Either she didn't hear me or she didn't heed me. By then I had recognized her, though. "Catalan!" I shouted again, "The ballyhoos first—they burst! If one of them starts up this side of the river, we won't be able to contain it."

That did it. I pointed across the river and she spared a look just in time to see another ballyhoo burst. Her eyes went wide. She nodded and left off the tree she'd barely begun to race to the nearest ballyhoo and start on that.

So I followed. The ballyhoo fell with a crash. Catalan sliced off the top and the two of us shoved that into the river and pushed it off. Leaving the almost-branchless trunk for somebody else to roll in, Catalan took aim at the next ballyhoo and brought it down too.

Shovelers followed us, scraping up the duff and tossing it by the shovelful into the river. We were lucky—it wasn't more than two inches thick this close to the river—we could scrape down to bare rock.

We could feel the heat from the fire now. Somebody'd brought a second chainsaw. I grabbed him and dragged him to the water's edge and in. He looked at me like I was nuts, but I didn't waste time on explanations, just took the chain saw from him and held it high and slogged across the river with it.

I'd gauged the depth of the water by the clashings charging through it. I *hadn't* counted on coming waist high to a pack of grumblers in midstream. Grumblers are only dog-sized but that many of them will take on humans if they're threatened—or think they are. They grumbled at

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me—I couldn't hear it but I could tell by the way their fringed muzzles were working overtime—but they were too busy treading water to really care, so I bulled right through them.

There were three ballyhoos on the opposite bank. By now, I had all too good an idea how far they could throw those embers. Cutting those three was our only chance to keep the fire on the far side of the river. I attacked the first with a vengeance, not stopping to worry about how I could get it pushed off by myself. As long as the crown was under water I figured Milo's Ford had a half a chance.

I dropped that one and went on to the second. I was sweating like a pig now, from the effort and the nearing flames. Some wicked bit of my mind wondered what had ever possessed the Texan Guild to coin such a phrase—pigs don't sweat.

The second ballyhoo hit the water with a crash and a splash and I raced for the third. I wasn't sure I was going to make it—the flames were already too close for comfort. I got it dropped though and then leaned into it to shove the crown into the river.

Something pounded me hard on the shoulder—three times before I could react. I whirled to find the guy I'd taken the chain saw from. "Your jacket was on fire!" he shouted. "Let's get this shoved off and get the hell out of here!"

We did both. As we hit the water, with him carrying the chain saw this time, I realized he'd shoved the other two trees off too. God only knows why he'd followed me across the river—people do the strangest damn things when they're scared—but thank god for the favor!

The grumblers were still treading water in mid-stream, grumbling irritably into their whiskers as they paddled. Since they were making no attempt to reach the town side of the shore, it was obvious they expected the fire to leap the river. I could only hope my helper and I had at least made that a little more difficult.

He gave me a hand again as we hit the bank—with such a yank that I flopped to land like a beached whale. Then he was helping me up. A tree drifted downstream just that moment, so I realized why he'd felt the need for urgency. "Thanks," I shouted, but I don't know if he heard me—he was too busy stamping out a spark that had landed scant inches from his feet.

And then I was too busy stamping out sparks to repeat myself. I took off my jacket, scarcely noticing the hole burned in it, and wet it down to beat out anything else that landed nearby.

And that was what we did for the next few hours. It felt like days—I know it was hours only because Leo told me what time it was when he dragged me back to Milo's Ford for food and coffee. What I *needed* was a bath—I was covered head to toe with soot and sweat—but I didn't have

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the energy and, anyway, the town's water was being used elsewhere at the moment.

Still, reinforcements had arrived by the hover-full, so I was willing to take a break before my body quit on me. Just sitting took all the energy I had left.

Somebody passed me a cup of coffee and a plate of eggs—Cornish hen eggs, from the size of them. If I'd had the strength I'd've had somebody's heart for wasting the gene pool like that. As they were already cooked, I ate 'em.

When I finished, the same somebody took the plate and handed it back with a second helping. This time I was revived enough to pay some attention to what was going on around me. The guy who was shoving food at me was the same guy who'd followed me across the river.

"Damned if I know what possessed you to cross that river," I said, "but thanks for the help."

He shrugged and gave me a shy sort of grin. "Least I could do for somebody who threatened to shoot my balls off."

I blinked at him and wiped soot from my face. Sure enough—it was the same guy I'd turned my persuader on, somewhere in the dim dark past. I thought back—in reality, it had only been a few hours earlier. "I was aimed lower," I said. "I don't waste good genes." I stuck out my hand. "I'm Annie Jason Masmajean."

"Pallab Hatcher Brahe," he told me in return—then he laughed, taking my explanation for a joke. "I thought you looked familiar. No reflection on me, then, that you wanted to save my genes. You saved the kangaroo rex."

"You never know what might turn out to be useful," I said.

He looked suddenly abashed. "Not me," he said. "I screwed up bad."

I knew he was thinking about the lynch mob he'd gotten up. "Good," I said. "If you know that much, maybe you can keep your priorities straight next time something needs doing." I fixed him with as steely an eye as I could manage, given all the smoke in the air. "Fire fighting first, justice second."

Something flashed in his eye and I said, "*Justice*, Pallab, not vengeance, and not blind striking out at the nearest scapegoat. Just because you don't like the man doesn't mean he sets fires. Show a little good sense—that would hurt him as much as it hurts you!"

My throat was hoarse and sore, from all the shouting and the smoke. I poured some coffee down it, hoping that would help some. It did—the coffee was mildly spiked.

Hatcher Brahe looked as if I'd spiked him.

"I saw Jongshik Caner Li set two fires earlier this week. Good thing they were small enough we could just stamp them out. But he was in

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the right place at the right time to have started that one—" he waved a hand in the general direction of the river "—as well."

"*Saw* him start two fires? Bend down and set fire to the woods with a match each time?"

"No, of course not! Nobody's stupid enough to be that obvious!"

I was more than a little cranky myself, so I matched his tone. "So what did you *actually* see?"

"First time, we were out about five miles west of here." He paused a moment, took a step back in his telling. "Jongshik is our caner. There's a good stand of goldrushes there. I went along to help him gather a couple of bundles of cane."

All right, I could follow that so far. About time for the town to replace some of the older baskets and chairs.

He went on, "I was bending over to scythe the goldrushes—my back was to Jongshik, I grant you—when I heard Jongshik yell for help. I looked around and he was stamping out flames."

"So you helped him stamp out the flames. And?"

"And not much. He looked scared. Hell, I was scared, too. I know how dry the woods are. But we got it out. I reamed him out for being careless. He claimed he hadn't, and he looked even more scared." Brahe took a sip of his own coffee and said, "At the time, I thought he just didn't want to be blamed for—for his carelessness. But there was no way that fire could have started otherwise."

"And the second time?"

"Just like the first. That was the second trip we made for goldrushes—they're awkward carrying at the length Jongshik needs. Except that this time I spotted the fire. He helped me put it out but . . ." Instead of finishing the sentence, he glowered into his coffee.

"How far away from the fire was Jongshik when you spotted it?"

"He could have thrown a match that far easily. Or it might not have flared until after he moved away."

"Or he *might* not have had anything to do with it."

"When it just 'coincidentally' happens twice in his presence?"

"Happened coincidentally twice in *your* presence," I pointed out. "I can't think of a better way to avoid suspicion than to cast it on someone else first."

Somebody else might have slugged me for that suggestion. Maybe Brahe was as tired as I was, even though he was some thirty years younger, or maybe he was just fair now he'd had chance to think about it.

He said, "I couldn't have set the big one. I was in town all evening."

Meaning Jongshik hadn't been. "So Jongshik was out there?"

"Yeah. The goldrushes out there dry up red. He uses them for pattern."

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I thought about that for a while. "Awfully stupid of him to admit he was in the vicinity."

"I was just thinking that," Brahe said. His shoulders slumped. "And I was just thinking I could probably rig a device that would start a fire two days *after* I walked away from it. *I'm* not even very good with technological devices. Lots of people are better—they'd have thought of it first, in fact."

He stared into his cup. Got up, got us both more coffee. Then he resumed staring into his cup. "I still don't like the coincidence." He met my eyes. "I know, I know, the coincidence makes me as suspicious as it makes Jongshik, but I was there and I know *I* didn't set it."

He glared at me. "Dammit, there's been no rain—no thunderstorms with lightning—not even heat-lightning! If Jongshik didn't set those fires, how the hell could they have started?"

"Good question," I said.

The fire was pronounced "out," which only meant that the area would have to be watched closely for two days or so. There was always the chance that a burning ember could restart it. So the firewatch was on. Leo drove home—I fell asleep on the way and woke up only long enough to crawl into bed (not caring how sooty and sweaty that got the bedclothes or Leo; to his credit, he didn't care much about how sooty and sweaty I got him either) and fall asleep again.

When I woke up, it was late afternoon. First things first; I showered and changed the sheets. The mirror told me what I was feeling was not just bruises but scrapes as well. My face looked like the end cut of a well-done roast. I smeared on antiseptic with a liberal hand—well, at least I looked well-basted now. The thought made me ravenous.

Downstairs I found sandwiches waiting in the fridge and a note from Leo—he'd gone over to the lab to lend a helping hand. I ate my sandwiches on the way.

The lab was the usual madhouse (not having enough hands to get ahead of the game, we go from crisis to crisis), which was why I was pleased to see that Leo had acquired an interested onlooker. The more the merrier. . . .

Leo was giving him Set Lecture No. 1 and sounding remarkably like Susan while he did it. ". . . Now you think this is a Cornish hen, pure and simple," he was saying.

"Sure, 'Earth authentic'—a gene for gene match with a Cornish hen on old Earth."

"Wrong," said Leo. "Nothing on Mirabile is truly Earth authentic. You know how much redundancy they built into the generation ships? Well, they built the same redundancy into the gene pool, just to make sure we

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couldn't lose a species we might need. Back on Earth, a Cornish hen has only Cornish hen genes. This one has not only a full set of genes for Cornish hen but a full set of genes for, oh, maybe blue jay or cassowary as well . . . *and* a set of instructions that say: Activate these only if the Cornish hen finds itself in such-and-such an EC. That's 'ecological conditions' to you and that includes what they eat, which is why Susan doesn't want to feed them local grain."

The onlooker said, "Oh. So *that's* why she insisted we bring their feed, too."

Leo nodded. "When you raise Cornish hens in Milo's Ford, the eggs they lay hatch Cornish hen chicks. Here—well, the EC's different here, despite the 'imported' grain—who knows what'll hatch? When they tried to raise Cornish hens up near Last Edges, they got everything from blue jay to cassowary. Chie-Hoon thinks it was the higher lime in the soil—" he shrugged "—but it might have been the higher average temperatures. Or it might have been something else. EC can differ even from one *farm* to the next."

Leo caught my eye, grinned a welcome and went right on with his lecture. "And, whether the redundancy was necessary or not, we're stuck with it: they didn't include a set of instructions for 'cancel.' Or maybe they did but it was in the chunk of ships' records that got lost on the way," he added, just to be fair.

"Okay, they were trying to give us every chance. That's why the redundancy—but why the Dragon's Teeth?"

(He was using "Dragon's Teeth" to mean anything that wasn't "Earth authentic." Leo'd managed to straighten him out on EA so I kept my mouth shut to see how he'd handle this one.)

"They just didn't think far enough ahead." Leo eyed the bird again. "It *looks* like a Cornish hen. . . . Breed it with another Cornish hen and you get Cornish hens. But the hidden genes on this one may be bluejay—and the hidden genes on its mate may be cassowary. And those hidden genes are crossing just as surely as the visible genes are. The technical term for the genetic patchwork result is 'chimera.' "

He paused for dramatic effect. "Now hit the right EC to switch on the hidden genes and the *practical* effect is Dragon's Tooth. That bluejay/cassowary chimera, Chie-Hoon tells me, was close to eight feet tall and got its manners from the jay side of the family. The only good thing about it was that it couldn't fly. Lucky thing *those* weren't viable!"

"I dunno about that," I said. "It *was* tasty."

Should have kept my mouth shut. Now I was officially on duty again.

Mike looked up and said, "Good news, Annie! The ashes from the fire just about wiped out the hopfish population downriver!"

Well, that was a nice surprise. The hopfish were a damn nuisance. The

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best we'd been able to do was make them a favorite in soups and dinners. That meant we didn't lose all the benefit of the rice they devoured from our rice fields. They eat it, we eat them. Trouble was, we couldn't eat them morning, noon, and night, which was how they ate our rice.

"Best news I've heard all morning," I told Mike. I gave Leo a peck on the cheek and pulled up a chair to see what Mike was up to. "How'd that work out?"

"The ash asphyxiated 'em, Annie. It got in their gills and smothered 'em." He grinned at me. "Disgusting thought, isn't it?"

I grinned back. "Extremely." That explained the school of hopfish I'd seen leaving the river; they'd known something I hadn't. "—And what have we here?"

Mike looked up from the little pile of seeds he was working over. "I had a thought," he said.

"Do tell."

"Fire-stripped land is perfect ecological conditions for lodgepole and longleaf pine. I was thinking now we've got just the opportunity to start a grove or *lots* of groves. . . ."

I held up both hands. "Before you complicate the issue thoroughly," I said, "I want to do a full workup on the EC around Milo's Ford."

He squinted at me. "We've got one, Annie."

"We've got one from *before* the fire." We'd done it several years ago, trying to figure out why the Cornish hens did well in that area and nowhere else. "I need one for the current EC around Milo's Ford. As you've just pointed out with your lodgepole pine seeds, things have changed."

He looked at me glumly. "I suppose so," he said, and made a big deal of scraping his chair back from the bench. I knew a pet project when I saw one. Mike likes pine trees better than just about anything (except Selima, of course). If he had his way, Mirabile would be a forest of pines—all Earth authentic, mind you—and nothing but.

I patted him on the shoulder. "You do me a full gene-read on the Earth authentics you want to introduce. I'll go do the EC on Milo's Ford."

"Great!" Mike slid his chair back in a whole helluva lot faster than he'd slid it out.

I glanced at Leo and finished, "If I've got a volunteer to help me?"

Leo nodded, as I knew he would, but then his onlooker spoke up as well. "I'll help. I need a lift back to Milo's Ford anyway. I'll be glad to help any way I can."

Leo was shaking his head vehemently. "Not yet, Jongshik. Give things a chance to shake down a bit first."

"But Leo, I *didn't* start the fire! I swear it!"

"I believe you, Jongshik. But the entire population of Milo's Ford is

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a tougher proposition. As of today, they'll likely still be too exhausted and too angry to think straight about you."

If Leo believed Jongshik Caner Li, it was a good bet he *hadn't* caused the fires. I looked him over, now that I had the chance. He was anxious and thin, and he had the palest skin I've ever seen on a human being other than an albino—took me a moment to realize that part of that paleness was the anxiety. Still, the genes were clearly interesting enough that I wasn't about to risk his ass in his home town just yet.

"Sit," I said to him. "You're going to stay here and gofer for Mike. He needs your hands more than I do just now."

"But—"

"No buts. Sit—and tell me about the two previous fires you and Pallab Hatcher Brahe saw start up."

He sat so abruptly I knew it was just as well I'd leaned on him. He was still in shock. The mouth opened but nothing came out.

"You and Pallab went for goldrushes. Tell me what happened next," I prompted.

"I didn't—"

"I didn't say you did. Tell me what happened next, before I get too cranky to listen."

Leo said, "You don't want to see her cranky, Jongshik. Believe me. And she's asking because she needs the information."

I was already cranky. Leo's calmer approach, bless him, worked much better.

Jongshik took a deep breath, frowned a bit, as if thinking back that far was tough work. "I can't tell you much, Jason Masmajean. I know Pallab thinks I was being careless that first time. But I wasn't, I swear it. I *know* how dry the brush is this year."

"Tell me what you saw, that's all."

"I *don't* smoke, I *hadn't* lit any kind of a fire, and there was nothing in my equipment that *I* can figure would have caused a spark—" He stared at me, willing me to believe him. "I looked down and there was a fire at my feet. That's all!"

Leo said, "You were using a scythe for the canes, right? Any chance the scythe struck sparks off a flint outcropping?"

"No, Leo, no chance. I wasn't using the scythe. I was tying up canes I'd already cut."

"Spark might have smoldered a bit before it brought up flames," I said. "I like your theory, Leo. It's a possibility—if there was flint in the area."

Jongshik spread his hands. "I don't know."

"Something to look into," I told Leo. Then I said to Jongshik, "How about the second incident?"

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Jongshik slumped. Not much, just enough to let me know he didn't think I was going to believe him this time.

"Try me," I said.

That startled him upright. Again, he took a deep breath. "I was—" he stood suddenly to demonstrate "—bending down to gather up canes. I looked back to see where Pallab was. You—please understand that I was looking at things almost upsidedown. I think—I *think* I saw a plant burst into flame. I was so surprised that I couldn't do anything for—it seemed like a long time. Then Pallab yelled and I realized I hadn't been imagining it and I went to help him beat it out."

Leo said, "You think Pallab set it?"

"No. No, of course not. Unless it was like you said—sparks from the scythe. Pallab *was* cutting cane when it happened. But it looked to me like the plant just caught fire from nothing." He drew a hand across his forehead and sat down again. "I know this is stupid of me, but all I could think of was those old stories about people who can start fires just by thinking about them. I couldn't tell Pallab that. I don't even believe it myself."

"That makes several of us," I said, noting the dubious look on Leo's face. "So far I like Leo's theory best. Come on, Leo. Let's go see for ourselves."

Jongshik gave me one last pleading look. "Not yet," I said again. "Mike needs your help." I gave Mike's name just enough emphasis to goose him into looking up, catching on, and saying, "Yeah, I could use it."

Leo and I left Mike to handle that one. When we were out of earshot, I told Leo, "Anybody asks at Milo's Ford: Jongshik's under house arrest until we get this sorted out."

"Right."

I wouldn't have recognized the place. At least, not the far side of the river. I've seen the results of forest fires before, but it always stuns me. The town side of the river was soot-blackened and covered with a two-inch layer of ash. The other side—well, the other side was gone. The fire had burned right to the bank and there was nothing left but ash and charred tree spars. A fog of soot-black smoke still clung to the barren ground.

Seeing that, it's easy to think that nothing's left. I could read that reaction in the faces around me. I couldn't share it, though. I *know* what's happening under that scorched ground—underneath there are millions of seeds just waiting for a chance at sunlight and at all those nutrients the ash puts back into the soil. Meanwhile, even over the sound of the river, I could hear the cracking noises of charred trees cooling, the flurry of insects come to take advantage of those that had already cooled, the

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beating wings of the thousands of chatterboxes (that's Mirabile's analogue to the bird) come to take advantage of the insects. . . .

"Making out like pirates," I said to Leo, indicating the chatterboxes.

Leo chuckled—one of my favorite sounds in this world—and said, "And you complain Mirabile doesn't have enough insectivores?"

"It doesn't. The chatterboxes won't eat anything Earth authentic. Just as well. Most of our imports would poison them. Meanwhile, they do just fine at keeping down the native insects."

"Jason Masmajean! Annie!"

The voice from behind us made us both turn. It was Tomas Finest Irizarry, which meant I could have safely brought Jongshik back with us. Irizarry was damn good at his job, which was seeing that the right person was arrested for a crime and that his suspect made it to trial alive.

With him was Pallab Hatcher Brahe. Given the expression on Brahe's face, Irizarry had read him the same riot act I had.

Irizarry looked from me to Brahe and said, "Here, Annie, you can always use extra hands. He's yours for two months total."

"I'll keep my persuader handy," I said.

"Ouch," said Irizarry. He knows what I load the persuader with—I used it on him once. To Brahe, he said, "Now I *know* you'll mind your manners." To me, he said, "I want a word with you in private."

"Fine. Leo, you and Pallab get started on those samples. This won't take but a minute." I gave Irizarry the look I use to tell people it had better not.

He nodded. Together we retired a short distance away. I sat down on the stump of one of the ballyhoo trees Catalan had cut down so short a time ago. "Pull up a chair," I said, patting the spot beside me. The stump was downright striking, the rings being extremely well defined.

He did. "I hear you spirited away the suspect last night."

"Susan did. I just reminded the mob there was a fire coming their way." I held up both hands. "Before you get stroppy—I'm not convinced he had anything to do with the fires. If you want to talk to him, he's under house arrest—helping Mike out back at the main lab."

He nodded again. That obviously took care of the thing foremost on his mind.

"You don't think he was responsible for the fires, Annie?"

"Leo doesn't think he's responsible for the fires, which is a point in his favor." I grinned and added, "But then I'm biased. Officially, I don't think anything yet. I need to know more. Still, if you'll be staying here for a time, I'll bring Jongshik home." Lest Irizarry give me an argument, I added, "This *is* his home."

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"Annie, you're my favorite liar. You *don't* think Jongshik responsible or you'd never have leaned on that 'home' bit."

I had to admit he was right, though I hadn't thought it through. So I took the time to tell him everything I'd heard, both from Pallab and from Jongshik, about the first two incidents. I added in Leo's theory for good measure.

Irizarry looked thoughtful. "I'd like to see both spots they talked about. I like Leo's flint theory, too. First, though, I think I'll go have a talk with Jongshik Caner Li."

"Good. Then I can get back to my job." Figuring the interview was over, I turned my attention to the tree rings. I was gouging out a cross sample, when Irizarry said, "Annie? What on earth is so interesting about a tree stump?" Irizarry's the nosy type; just as well in his chosen profession.

"What is so interesting about this tree stump," I said, "is that this area seems to have gone up in flames about once every—" I paused to count the lighter rings between the darker ones "—fifteen years or so."

He stooped to follow my point.

"And it's been doing it for a lot longer than there have been humans on Mirabile."

"Natural fires," Irizarry began.

"*Regular* fires," I said. "Count 'em for yourself. Every thirteen to fifteen years."

"What's that mean?"

"I'll let you know as soon as I find out. Now scoot and let me do my job."

I honestly thought that would be my most interesting find until I'd had a chance to analyze the samples we were taking. Instead of slogging across the river, this time we took one of the town kayaks. Using the hover, we'd already found, stirred up too much ash to permit continued breathing. Even a bit of wind added to the sting in the air.

A lot of the volunteer firefighters from the previous night were still ranging on the far side of the river, checking hot spots. Not my idea of a fun job—they checked hot spots by putting a hand down at the edges of them, to see if they were still so hot as to restart the fire.

I didn't think it likely myself: there wasn't that much left to burn.

Leo and Pallab had already set to work collecting soil samples, so I did my bit with what plantlife remained. It was a tricky business—some of the trees were still glowing and you had to keep your eye out for toppling trees and falling branches. More than once I got steered away from sampling a tree because the firefighters knew from experience that one would come down—and soon.

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They may be volunteers, but they are professionals. We've had to reinvent almost every skill locally. Ships' records contained detailed instructions for doing just about anything they knew how to do back on Earth, but that doesn't give the first generation any practical experience at the matter. You don't get practice fighting forest fires aboard a generation ship.

These folks had reinvented fighting forest fires. We even had some third generation volunteers now. I've got a great deal of respect for them, you can bet!

So I picked one I've known a bit—one of Elly's kids, name of Clelie Spinner Belile—and followed her around, gathering my samples in her wake. After about a minute, she caught me at it.

"Hi, Annie," she said, "Bet I'll be spinning tales about *you* again! Crossing the river to the fire-side to cut down trees. I wish I'd been here to see it."

"If you'd been here," I pointed out, "*I* wouldn't have been doing it, *you* would have."

She laughed. "Maybe not. But tell me all about it, not leaving out Susan's part, and tell me how you knew about the ballyhoos. *That* was a stroke of genius."

"*That* was pure observation."

She shrugged, meaning I wasn't going to get off that easily. Then she said, "Let me show you something." She called to another firefighter to keep an eye on her position, then she led me much deeper into the burned area.

There were still trees standing. Not that you could tell from one look what kind they were—the charring made everything look alike. But there were groves of trees still standing.

We skirted a tree whose trunk was still burning—from what was left of the branches, I'd've said it had been a popcorn tree. Overdone popcorn, if you asked me.

Clelie lead me right up to the grove that was still standing. She sniffed and patted a moment, then thumped it hard enough that a layer of charred bark dropped to the ground, raising ash all around us. "Have a close look, Annie."

I did. The core of the tree had not been touched by the fire—it lived still. That made me stoop down to examine the burnt bark. It was maybe three inches thick. How thick it had been before it caught, I couldn't guess.

Clelie had moved on to a second tree in the grove. Again she did everything but taste it—then delivered another thump, with the same result. Living core beneath charred bark.

"Clelie? Get me a chunk of the core?"

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"Sure thing." She laid into it with her axe and popped me out a few good-sized pieces. "Enough?"

"Plenty," I said, gathering up the pieces to examine them more closely. The grain was unmistakable—they were my ballyhoo trees—the ones that had gone up like torches. "Ballyhoos," I said aloud.

"Yes," said Clelie. "And just about every one we've found is still alive. So what made you cut down the ballyhoos?"

I opened my mouth to explain but she said, "Never mind, Annie. I know. I saw a couple torch myself. I'd have had the same impulse. I just thought you ought to know—the damn ballyhoos seem to *like* fire."

I closed my eyes and saw it all over again. "What's more," I said, "they do their best to spread it."

Every fifteen years? I wasn't ready to talk about that yet, but it was well worth thinking about.

I paid her back for the samples and information with everything I remembered from the night before. As I talked, I gathered as many samples as I could. We didn't have much time until dark fell.

There was no point heading back to the lab for the night. Pallab offered to put us up and I saw no reason not to take him up on the offer. Why put the kids at the lab through my general crankiness when there was someone who deserved it more?

First thing I did was commandeer his computer, link it to the main computer back at the lab, and start to run my samples. Then I got introduced to Pallab's wife and fed at the same time. The wife was anxious. The kids were still at Elly's, she'd talked to them and found them still over-excited from the night before. I knew how they felt and said as much.

With some good food in me, I felt much better. I leaned back with every intention of taking a break from the problem, glanced at Leo, suddenly remembering that he'd opened this territory, and leaned forward again.

"Hey, Leo! Tell me what you'd use to build a fire?" I realized belatedly that I was not being too clear and was about to explain the question. . . .

But Leo was right there. "I assume you mean when I was solo and I assume you mean in this EC."

I nodded.

He named some of the local trees. A couple he had to describe to Pallab to learn what common name had been given to them—he'd only learned them by sight or scent in one or two cases. He thought a bit more, then he gave me a startled look. "Annie!" he said, "the ballyhoos!"

"What about the ballyhoos?"

"They don't burn worth a damn!" He gave me a second startled look, for all the world as if I might think him crazy.

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I didn't, not in the least, but Pallab said, "That's crazy, Leo. You saw them yourself last night—they burned like—" And then he stopped abruptly. He gave Leo a sheepish look.

Leo said, "If you want to start a fire, you strip the bark from a ballyhoo. Better than any kindling you can name. But you *don't* put ballyhoo branches on your fire because they don't burn worth a damn."

Pallab nodded energetic agreement. "Jillian—Builder Motwani—is still mad that we wasted the ballyhoos we cut down by tossing them into the river."

"I'd like to talk to her," I said, "and maybe to your town carpenters too." I meant when next we had the chance, but Pallab and his wife were up and out to fetch before I could stop either of them.

I eyed Leo. He eyed me. We had just enough time for a nice round of necking before the house was full of people and I was hearing all about the virtues of ballyhoo wood from a furniture maker and a handful of builders. Ballyhoo wood, it seemed, was virtually fireproof. Oh, you could chop it into small pieces and put it on a raging fire and *eventually* it would burn but for all intents and purposes—

One of the builders pounded his foot on the floor. "Practically fireproof house," he said, "and a good thing too, under the circumstances!"

"Under the circumstances," I agreed. We were into strange circumstances. That was nothing new for Mirabile.

Irizarry turned up the next day with Jongshik Caner Li in tow. Susan had tagged along for the ride. It was hard to tell whether Susan had come to help out with the EC or to protect her interest in Jongshik. Having saved his life once, she seemed ferociously interested in keeping him healthy.

She needn't have bothered. What with Irizarry hovering about and with Pallab and the rest of the townsfolk embarrassed as all hell about their respective parts in the mob action, there wasn't much to worry about on that count.

Still, I knew it wasn't over. Embarrassment would eventually aggravate their suspicion of him. After all, if they could prove something against him, their actions would be—in retrospect—justifiable. Human nature, I suppose, but it's sure one of those things I'd breed out of the species if I had my way. Not a useful trait.

I was just as glad to see Jongshik myself. Pallab wasn't sure he could locate the spots he'd seen the earlier fires start up. That didn't surprise me—the landscape had changed considerably. But between the two of them maybe we could find the places again. Being the caner, Jongshik would have a better idea of where he usually went for his materials, even given the changes in the landscape. At least, I hoped so.

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I rounded up Leo and Pallab and headed out to apply to Irizarry for the use of Jongshik. Irizarry pointed across the river: Susan and Jongshik were digging in the thick ash. I hailed them and got back Susan's signal for five minutes.

It was ten, but when they showed up, they were both tremendously excited. The first five sentences (at least) were completely garbled.

"Do you suppose," I said to Leo, "that you could slow her down to my speed?"

Leo gave Susan a long look, up and down. "Don't know which button to push," he said, finally.

That had the desired effect. Susan laughed, took a deep breath and started over. "A whole troop of grumblers moved into the burned area, Mama Jason. They're out there digging and eating as if their lives depended on it. We wanted to see what they were after, so we scared a bunch of them off."

She paused a moment, as if she expected me to read her the riot act. Since she hadn't been mauled, I assumed she'd scared them off carefully, so I didn't say anything.

Having lived through telling me that, she took another deep breath and finished on a note of triumph: "Look what they were eating!" She thrust out two very sooty hands. "Roasted hopfish cysts!"

She poured them into my outstretched hands like so many chestnuts. Sure enough—they were hopfish cysts all right. Roasted and partially gnawed. Even without Susan's eyewitness evidence I might have guessed they'd been chewed by grumblers; the toothmarks were pretty characteristic.

Leo peered into my cupped hand. "Tasty," he said.

"I don't know about that. But it might cut down on how much of our rice they eat next year."

"Mama Jason?" That was Susan. She looked confused as all hell.

Her excitement had been purely intellectual, I guess. The grumblers would eat hopfish cysts. She hadn't taken it the next step. "We do a little controlled burning in the rice fields. Roast the cysts, which kills a lot of them. Invite the grumblers in to eat a lot more. Good work, Susan!" I poured the cysts back into her hands.

"Send Mike a full report and have him pass it around. Meanwhile, I'm going to borrow Jongshik here." To Jongshik, I said, "I want to see the locations of the earlier fires, if you can find them for me."

Susan gave a suspicious glance at Pallab and a proprietary one at Jongshik. "I'm coming, too."

I know that tone of voice; I've used it enough myself. "All right," I said, "but that hasn't gotten you out of the hopfish-grumbler study."

Irizarry raised an eyebrow as we headed for the boats.

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I grinned at him and said, "I'll let Susan sit between 'em."

Pallab and Jongshik both looked at their feet. That was good enough for Irizarry—he laughed. "All right then," he said. He followed us down to push us off.

It was a long trek, but that was better than stirring up the ash with a hover. We passed two more troops of grumblers along the way. Each time we stuck around long enough to verify that they were indeed digging for hopfish cysts. Then we went on.

Eventually we found the sites of both of the previous fires. At least, Jongshik was sure we'd found both spots. There's not much left of cane after a fire that hot.

No flint outcroppings in either area. That made Jongshik look anxious and Pallab look still more embarrassed. Embarrassed was better than suspicious, I thought. Irizarry was right—I didn't think Jongshik was an arsonist.

Seeing the canebrake cheered me. Life, once it catches hold on a world, is damned stubborn. At the stubby bases of the burnt canes, tiny green shoots had already begun to push their way into the sunlight. In a week or two the whole forest would begin to green up again.

For no reason at all, that made me think of Leo. I turned to say something and found him smiling over the shoots as well.

Then we made the long trek back. Night had already begun to fall when we reached Milo's Ford. There was more I wanted to do but it would have to wait until the next day. Susan and I spent the rest of the evening passing our information on to Mike and running our samples through the lab computer.

The next morning, I rousted the bunch early and hustled them through breakfast. Then I went to get Jongshik as well.

It was Irizarry that met me at the door to Jongshik's. "Oh, it's you, Annie. Want to borrow him again?"

I cocked my head at him, took in *his* persuader, which I was betting *wasn't* loaded with rock salt. "Trouble?" I asked.

He laid the gun aside. "Just a precaution. Never know when there might be trouble from the neighbors."

Tactful fellow, Irizarry. There wouldn't be trouble from the neighbors as long as they felt Irizarry was guarding Jongshik to make sure they'd have no trouble from *him*. Economical, killing two birds with one stone like that.

"I'm glad you've got a half dozen kids," I told him. "Ever think of having a few more?"

"Coming from you, Annie, I'll take that as a compliment."

"It wasn't a pass," I said. "Sorry, but you don't get to me the way Leo does."

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He gave a mock sigh. "If only I were ten years older."

"Make that thirty. I'm not a cradle-robber." By this time, I'd stepped inside the house. Jongshik, still as white-faced as ever, was just finishing his breakfast. "Hi, Jongshik," I said. "I need to see several canebrakes that didn't get hit by the fire. Can you take us to a couple on this side of the river?"

He could, of course, and he would—anything to help—though he didn't understand how it would since there hadn't been any flint outcroppings at the sites of the earlier fires. . . . He got even paler as he spoke, casting worried glances at Irizarry.

For good reason, I suppose, but the lack of flint outcroppings cast as much suspicion on Pallab as it did on him—if we were talking about arson, that is. I said, "I just want a good look at the normal EC."

Irizarry shrugged and escorted us to the hover. He grinned like a Cheshire cat when I gestured Susan into the back seat between Jongshik and Pallab and stayed to wave us off.

Poor boy! Too damn much ash had sifted its way into town. We left him in a cloud of it. After a bit, though, we reached an area that wasn't dusted and we were out of the swirls of soot and into the forest.

Visually, this was the same EC as the far side of the river. At least, as the far side of the river had been before the fire. I wasn't seeing anything new or different. Both plants and animals seemed to be strictly Mirabilan. It made me all the more peeved that—what with the Earth authentics and their Dragon's Teeth—we had so little time to devote to the study of native biology. Everything we did was purely catch as catch can.

From the previous EC we'd done, I knew there was nothing poisonous to the touch in an area like this. You just didn't go around putting stuff in your mouth at random. And you went *around* a killquick if you spotted one. The killquick made spotting easy, being lemon-yellow—if it saw you first, it inflated to football size and let out a sound like a foghorn straight out of ship's records.

We didn't see a single grumbler as we trudged through the brush. Must have been they were all across the river stuffing themselves on hopfish cysts.

At last Jongshik said, "There! That's the kind I use!"

There was such relief in his voice, I had to stare at him. It took me a minute to realize that he'd *also* been worried that he might be out of a job if all his sources of raw material had burned up.

"All right," I said, "Samples of everything. Susan, get a chunk of soil—"

"And don't forget the bugs," she finished for me. "This is me, not Mike, remember?"

When Mike had started work with the team, he hadn't known that a

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soil sample meant everything in that chunk of soil. He'd spent nearly an hour picking the "extraneous" stuff out of his sample. I considered the whole episode my fault, not his—it's harder to tell what somebody doesn't know than what he does know, especially when to you it's a basic assumption.

"Snotty kid," I said. "I'm going to tell Mike you said that."

"Oh, no, Mama Jason! Please don't!"

"Then think before you open your mouth because next time I will tell Mike."

She nodded emphatically and we all set to business. A little while later, Susan was—very politely—showing Jongshik how to take a soil sample, including the bugs. We got leaves and bark, cane and berry, fern and frond. Leo used the sampler gun on a ferret-like creature I'd never seen before, that Susan and Jongshik startled out of a burrow with their soil sampling.

As before, there was no flint outcropping in the area. But I did get Jongshik to point out the plant he claimed to have seen burst into flame. It was a new one on me, so I not only took a sample but a specimen as well. Stubborn thing. Two of them came up in a row, then a long underground runner on it with no end in sight, unless it was the specimen several hundred yards to the left of us. We finally settled its hash with the sharp edge of a shovel. Jongshik couldn't tell me what it was called. Not interesting enough to have a common name. I stuck it in my kit and promised Jongshik we'd name it after him, at least in its scientific version.

From there I moved on to the popcorn and ballyhoo trees, so I took samples of both bark and wood. Pallab chopped, I gathered.

We were working on a ballyhoo when I realized I couldn't find any seedpods on the ground around its trunk. I inquired. Pretty soon the whole troop of us were scouting for seedpods. "Maybe it's male?" Susan said.

I pointed up. You could see the seedpods, but every one of them was well out of reach. "Just the wrong season for groundfalls," I said, "or maybe the ballyhoo is a hoarder."

"A hoarder?" said Pallab.

"Yeah," Susan told him. "Some plants hang onto their seeds until the conditions favor germination."

A perfectly brilliant thought struck me. "Conditions like fire?" I suggested.

From the expression on Susan's face, she thought it was a brilliant idea, too. "I'll get you some," she said. She threw her arms around the ballyhoo's trunk and tried to shinny up it. Her first start was a failure. "Gimme a boost, somebody."

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Pallab did, but the result was that Susan was Pallab's height up the trunk when the bark shredded and sent her sliding down in a shower of fibers. Susan glared up at the tree from a sitting position. "I thought it only did that *after* the bark had burned," she said dourly.

I couldn't help it. I pointed at the duff on the forest floor. Ninety percent of it had that same fibrous look.

"That's some fire hazard," she said, as she realized what was under her bottom. "Makes a good pillow, though," She got up, brushing herself off, and glared a bit more at the tree. "I'm *still* gonna get one of those seedpods," she told it. "Mama Jason, I'm borrowing Jongshik, Pallab, and the hovercraft."

Jongshik and Pallab looked at each other. Susan fixed them with a steely eye and added, "You can sit on opposite sides. I need you both to lean out the windows, anyway." Again she looked at me.

"Be my guest," I said.

She gave the ballyhoo tree one last maleficent assessment, then stomped off towards the hovercraft trailing Pallab and Jongshik.

Leo said, "Never volunteer."

"If anybody can coax a hovercraft high enough to get those samples, it's Susan. You haven't ridden with her lately, have you?"

"Just a few days ago. Hair-raising—but I assumed that was due to the urgency of the situation." He frowned. "Is that a good idea?"

"Letting her try? Sure. She'll be careful. She knows what I'd do to her if she weren't."

We took advantage of the opportunity to neck a bit, at least until we heard the hovercraft head in our direction. We broke our clinch just as Susan skimmed by us and shouted out the window, "There's smoke to the west, Mama Jason! About twenty miles!"

"Call it in and check it out!" I shouted back over the motor's roar. The hovercraft dipped once—Susan's way of nodding without risking her voice further—and headed off.

Leo squinted west. What with trees, neither of us could see anything much, but he was obviously getting an internal fix. "No towns in that area. If I remember correctly, there's one farm—I don't remember if they're raising any of your specialty items. . . . Lady's name was Ommanney?"

That did ring a bell. "Experimental farm—she's trying to domesticate half a dozen kinds of Mirabilan animals. At least we won't have to worry about getting them back into a suitable EC." Which was something of a relief.

I gave Leo's shoulders a last hug and said, "Come on. Let's get the rest of the sampling done, so we're ready to go when Susan gets back. I've got a long night of gene-reads ahead of me."

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We got back to work. Couldn't have been but ten minutes later, Leo called out, "Annie? Come tell me if I'm crazy. . . ."

"I don't have to," I said, "I *know* you are."

"Annie."

The tone was different this time. I headed over to where he was bent over a sample. "I've got that one," I said—it was the stubborn one with the runner.

"Feel it," he said. The tone was still strange.

Puzzled, I bent down, held out a finger. Leo took my finger and laid it on the base of the plant. It was warm. I thought for a moment that was only from his body heat but then I realized it was *warmer* than body heat. I closed my palm around the base. Yeah, definitely warmer than body heat—and the temperature was rising.

"You're not crazy," I said. "Grab a shovel. I want this one alive. We can put it in one of the soil sample cases. Selima will have a field day with it."

Leo looked at me as if *I* were the crazy one. "Annie, that plant is *warm*! Either it's not warm or it's not a plant."

"Wrong." I couldn't help grinning. "There are Earth authentics that do that. Plants that put out heat. Thermogenic, they call 'em."

We hacked through the runner and shoveled plant and soil into a case, Leo still casting a suspicious eye at me.

"Selima came across them in ship's records," I said. "They're something of a hobby with her. She'll love this—she's never had a live one to play with. Just the records." I leaned on the end of the shovel, trying to pull the names out of memory. "One was an arum, I remember. Earth authentic. The other—hang on a minute—was a philodendron."

"But why would a plant . . . ?"

"Selima couldn't come up with an answer either. Ship's records suggested the heat was a way of attracting pollinators. One of them was supposed to smell like rotten meat."

Leo bent for a sniff of our potted sample, shook his head.

I had to laugh. "Leo, how would *you* know what smells good to a Mirabilan pollinator?"

He grinned and shrugged.

"As I say, Selima will have a field day with a live specimen to play with. One of the Earth authentics supposedly had the metabolism rate of a hummingbird."

"I believe that," Leo said. He held the flat of his hand a few inches from the plant. "This one's certainly working overtime. I can feel the heat from here now!"

I felt my brow knit. I don't remember thinking at all, I just remember

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reacting—I shoved Leo back from the plant, hard enough that he sprawled.

"Hey!" he said, then "Hey! Holy sh—!" as the pot burst into flames.

I laid into it with the flat of the shovel. Beating the flames out wasn't easy—half the soil we'd potted it with was duff and at least two inches of that was shredded bark from the ballyhoos. Leo kept busy making sure none of the sparks reached the ground around the pot.

When we were sure it was out, I remembered to apologize for the shove. Along with the apology, I gave him the full-body check. He returned the favor.

Then I dug through the samples looking for the other specimens of that little goodie I'd collected. "Leo, call for a pickup, will you? This is *not* a safe place to hang around."

He overlapped. He was already on the hand unit doing just that. "Susan's on her way back," he said.

The uprooted specimens showed no change in temperature. "At least my backpack isn't about to go up," I said. "Jongshik's not our arsonist. And he was close to right when he claimed he saw a plant burst into flames."

I went back for another look at what was left in the pot. "The plant set fire to the duff. Easy to mistake that for the plant itself bursting into flame." I poked around at the remains. "I wonder if the plant survives the fires it sets—I can't tell for sure. I wish I hadn't hit it so enthusiastically. There's not much left."

"*That's* our arsonist?"

"If it's not, one of us is a pyrotic. Have you been setting fires telepathically?"

"Not since I got religion. Which was about five minutes ago." He contemplated the shattered remains of the plant. "Annie? What say we chop down the rest of those while we're waiting for Susan? The one in your pack isn't hot. . . ."

I got the gist. I didn't know if leaving the root left us vulnerable but it was something to do and it was revenge of a sort, so it felt satisfying.

"Oh, good, there's the hover," said Leo, straightening and turning toward the sound. Only the sound *wasn't* the sound of a hovercraft. A moment later, I knew he knew that as well as I did—from the look in his eyes.

It was the sound of fire, headed our way.

"We've got a fire headed our way," Leo said into the handunit. "Marking our position now. Get somebody in to pick us up *fast!* Will leave the transponder on permanent mark. Will head for the hills."

"Hills?" I said.

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Leo pointed north. "I opened this territory, remember? Rocky hills that way. Nothing on them to burn."

I couldn't see the fire but I could smell smoke now. "Let's go," I said. I dropped my pack and we both lit out in a run.

Seemed like we ran forever. The roar of the fire was good incentive but neither one of us is young and—adrenaline or no adrenaline—our flat-out run wasn't good enough.

The dense undergrowth had given way to more-or-less grassland. It might have made the running easier but it meant we could see what we were up against—at least, those rare moments when the gusting wind cleared the smoke from our eyes.

We crested a small rise and suddenly got a clear view of the way ahead. Leo was waiting for me at the top, which made me realize I was lagging behind, holding him back.

He flung out a hand to show me where we were headed—a chunk of rock sitting in the middle of the savannah. He was right: it would have been a good refuge from the flames. Dozens of animals had already sought its safety.

But in that moment I saw we weren't going to make it. The wind was even now blowing the fire across our path. If we'd been thirty years younger we *still* couldn't have made it across that plain before the fire swept it.

Leo turned to me and I could see by the look in his eyes that he knew it just as well as I did.

"Next suggestion?" I said.

He took me in his arms and kissed me, putting just about everything into that kiss. Then he leaned me back just a little, just to seeing and talking distance. "Annie, I love you. Marry me."

Under the circumstances, I couldn't think of much to say to that. The wind was ferocious; I could feel the heat of the fire.

Since I didn't answer, he gave me a second kiss, as if that might convince me. Then he pulled the hand unit out of his pocket and said into it, "I want a witness to a marriage agreement. I want a witness *now!*"

"You're on, Leo. Go," said the hand unit. I could barely make out the words over the sound of the fire but it was enough to turn me stubborn.

"Marry you!" I said, "I haven't even given you a courting present yet!"

"Under the circumstances," said Leo, with a nod at the flames some two hundred yards from us, "I'll pass on the courting present."

"Well, dammit, I *won't.* I'm too old-fashioned to change my ways at this point."

The wind had changed again. The head fire was aimed straight at us.

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The slope of the crest gave us a view of the devastation behind the rush of flames.

"I get married," I said, "I'm gonna do it proper, you damn fool. Now, come on. I'll race you. Last one through buys the wine for the wedding."

I grabbed his hand and pulled him back into a run. I'd challenged him to a race but I had no intention of leaving him behind. As long as I held his hand, I knew he'd stick with me.

Down the slope we charged, hand in hand, directly into the smoke and into the flames. I'd made out the head fire to be some twenty yards across—it was the longest twenty yards I've ever done in my life.

Neither of us could see, we were running as straight a line as Leo or I ever could. Couldn't breathe worth a damn because every time I opened my mouth I got a lungful of searing heat. Burning brands struck us on all sides. I could tell my hair was on fire but I wasn't about to stop to put it out.

Once Leo stumbled, but I grabbed with my free hand and kept him up and running.

And then, miraculously, I was running on cooling ash. I couldn't slow yet. I beat at my hair. Burned my hand some but got my hair put out.

It was Leo who pulled us both to a halt. "Annie," he said, gasping, "we made it through. We can stop now."

The words flicked a switch. My knees gave way and I hit the ground hard. Leo dropped beside me on one hand.

"Ouch!" He lifted the hand and knelt instead. "Watch out, Annie. The ground's littered with embers."

"Find yourself a cool spot and sit," I said.

He did. The cool spot he found was close enough that I could lean against him, so I did.

We sat like that for a long time, simply appreciating each other's company. Once in a while, we had to fling a burning brand away from us, but it was otherwise peaceful. Even the roar of the fire seemed like so much white noise.

A pack of grumblers, maybe the same one for all I knew, foraged in the burned ground behind us. Must have been a river somewhere nearby, for they were coming up with what looked like hopfish cysts. I watched them for a while—what we'd always taken for ornamental whiskers seemed to be much more than that—some kind of heat sensing organ. They didn't burn themselves once. That would be an interesting thing to look into—later, when I'd caught my breath.

The sound of the fire gradually receded into the distance. The wind swirled hot ash around us but—all things considered—we had a peaceful spot to rest our aching bones.

Then Leo said, "Listen!"

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For one horrible moment, I thought there was another fire behind us. But there was nothing left to burn. It was the sound of a hovercraft.

Leo cursed. "I dropped the hand unit," he said. "They don't know where to find us." He cursed quite a bit more.

Finally I couldn't stand it. I gave him a big kiss to shut him up and said, "You're the scout, Leo. You can walk us out of here if need be. What the *hell* are you so irate about?"

I got to my feet and started waving my hands. Leo, no longer cursing, but grinning through a crust of grit and grime, stood up and did likewise.

Minutes after we spotted the hovercraft, the hovercraft spotted us. It put down in a great cloud of ash and ember. A second after that Susan nearly bowled me over in her rush to a hug.

Tears were *pouring* down her cheeks. I don't know as I've ever seen her in such a state, not even when she was a small child. "Oh, Mama Jason! We all thought you were dead. You were right in the middle of the fire . . . and the handunit stopped transmitting. . . . We all thought you were dead! Oh, Noisy!" With that wail, she gave Leo just as bowl-over a hug as she'd given me.

Jongshik broke up the party. "Let's get them back to town. Those burns need treating."

Susan burst into tears all over again but that didn't stop her from hustling us into the hovercraft and heading back to town at well beyond the speed I'd have thought possible from a hovercraft.

Leo caught my eye and said, "A nice quiet ride into town. Just what I needed."

We had to skirt the fire but I'd bet the trip took less time than the straight route would have had anybody else been driving.

When we put down (right in the middle of Main Street—Susan didn't care how much ash she raised), there was an astonishing amount of chaos. The whole team was there, it turned out—Mike, Selima, Chie-Hoon, everybody. We got a cheer as we eased our sore bones out of the hovercraft. I only realized how many burns I had when somebody (if I ever find out who, he's not long for this world) clapped me on the shoulder to congratulate me on my survival.

There was an undercurrent from the townsfolk I couldn't place and didn't like. Luckily, Irizarry had the good sense to back 'em all off. It took Susan's help to do it but pretty soon we were bandaged, fed, and resting comfortably—a little drowsy from the pain-killers the local medic had pumped into us.

Irizarry sat himself down beside us and said, "Ready to talk yet, Annie? I can hold 'em a little longer but I'd rather not."

"Talk?" I said. "Yeah, I should turn the team loose on it, shouldn't I?"

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Irizarry surprised the hell out of me. "Talk," he repeated. "Name the culprit!" He pointed with his gun—"Pallab or Jongshik?"

Now I knew I'd been in shock. Leo too or he'd have spoken up sooner. I hadn't even noticed that Irizarry had them both in his sights.

"Neither!" Susan said. "They were both with me at the time!" From the sound of her voice, I'd've bet Irizarry would have had a second barrel of rock salt in his butt if she'd had the persuader to hand.

"Neither," I said to Irizarry, a lot more calmly. I was too tired to get excited, especially when I know Irizarry won't jump the gun. "I could name the culprit for you but I promised Jongshik that privilege, since he was the first to spot it in the act."

Yes, turn the team loose. That was the next step. "Selima, crank up a computer and pull all your files on those thermogenic plants of yours. I've got a Mirabilan analogue that you're just gonna love!"

"All right!" said Selima and turned to do it.

That's what I like about the younger generation—boundless enthusiasm.

"Susan, check the sample boxes you loaded into the hovercraft. I had to leave the second round behind. I'm hoping the cell-sample from the pyromaniac plant made it in in the first load. If not, somebody's gonna have to get more—very carefully!"

Irizarry and Jongshik both shouted at me at once. When I sorted it out, the questions were, "A plant set the fires?" and "You mean I really *did* see a plant burst into flame?"

"Yes and yes," I said, then Leo and I took turns telling them what we'd seen. You could have sorted out who in the room was a jason and who wasn't just by the expressions on their faces. Everybody in the team was intensely interested; everybody who wasn't had a look of such disbelief you'd've thought I'd told them I'd found evidence of previous human life on Mirabile.

Selima took over from there—waving her *Arum maculatum* and her *Philodendron selloum* at them. "Earth authentic," she kept saying over their protests, "Earth authentic!" as if it were a magic word for believability. "Look, this one hits 114 degrees no matter what the ambient temperature is!"

The rest of the team helped Susan unload the specimen boxes and sorted through for the Mirabilan sample. They not only found the cell sample but also a few limp leaves from one of the culprits. Susan had collected a specimen too, it seemed. There was a minor altercation over who got to do the gene-read but Selima won.

Irizarry shook his head. "That sorry-looking thing is the arsonist?"

"It looks much meaner when it's not wilted," Leo told him. "You can see the mad glitter in its eyes."

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Irizarry got a bit of a mad glitter in his own eyes. "We should be out rooting them up," he said, "shouldn't we? I'm not sure I'd recognize it from this."

"I can draw it for you," Jongshik said. "I know what it looks like in the wild." Without waiting for an answer, he snatched up a sheet of printer paper and went to work.

"I'm *not* sure we should be out uprooting them," I said. "I want that gene-read first. Pulling them out may set them off." I gave Leo's hand an apologetic squeeze. "Sorry," I said to him. "This hasn't been one of my better days. Pulling them up seemed like the thing to do at the time."

"This one didn't burn,'" Irizarry pointed out.

"Long root," I explained. "Maybe we set off others at the other end of the root. And the plant didn't actually go up—it just set fire to the ballyhoo bark it was growing in. For all I know, the plant's fireproof."

"Not likely," Selima said. "But I'd bet money the seeds are. Now why—" she handed me the printout of the plant's genetic map "—*why* would it want to set fires?"

"And why every fifteen years?" I added.

"I like that question, too," Selima said. "It must get something out of a fire."

"Nutrients," said Susan. "From the ash. For its seeds to thrive in."

"Maybe fire wipes out a scale or a fungus that attacks it," Mike suggested. "Fire does that for my pine trees."

"Maybe both. Hey, Mike? Do the hopfish eat this the way they eat our rice?"

"I don't know. But I'm gonna find out." Mike shoved through the crowd. "I'm going to commandeer another computer. Keep me posted."

"Here's the sketch." Jongshik handed it over. It was better than good. Anybody could have picked the plant out from his work. To the best of my memory, it was entirely accurate. I handed it to Leo, who confirmed it.

Irizarry snatched the paper from Leo's hand. "Now I've got something to work with. I don't need to know the why of it, Annie. All I need to know is, does uprooting one set off others?"

"Sorry," I said, "but you're wrong there. That's not all you need to know."

"I've got my suspect, Annie. If we don't wipe it out, Milo's Ford will go up in smoke sooner or later. Once every fifteen years, if you're right about those tree rings."

"I'm right about those tree rings. We're looking at an ecological cycle. Uprooting the pyromaniacs isn't going to put an end to the cycle, either. Milo's Ford will *still* go up in flames every fifteen years."

"Still? Why?"

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"Because the ballyhoo trees make the entire area a fire hazard. Because they're doing it deliberately. Do you think you can police every inch of forest for pyromaniac plants? Even if you could, what about sparks from our equipment? What about lightning? Sooner or later, this whole area will catch—and the later the worse. The longer the ballyhoos shed bark, the higher the hazard."

Irizarry looked as tired as I felt. "Then we can't build towns in this EC. We'll have to relocate Milo's Ford."

"Oh, hell, Mama Jason," Susan said. "What about the Cornish hens?"

"Chances are the ash from the fire across the river has already done in the Cornish hens. You know as well as I do, the EC here has changed enough that the Cornish hens will start hatching Dragon's Teeth. Besides, when it comes down to a conflict between Earth authentic species and Mirabilan species, we've got to get on with the Mirabilan species or we won't make it on this world."

Even Irizarry, to judge from his expression, could see the truth in that. "So we relocate everybody from Milo's Ford," he said.

"At least temporarily. You want my advice, you get it. Here's what we do. . . ."

It took a week to relocate everybody from Milo's Ford, along with everything they owned. The firefighters kept a firewatch going the entire time, of course—that EC made it absolutely necessary. While everybody else moved furniture, we put in twenty-eight hour days finding out everything we could about our pyromaniac and its partners in crime, the ballyhoo trees.

Susan's piloting got us the seed samples we needed. Leo did a little experimenting with ballyhoo branches and seeds. Clelie supervised, I'm glad to say, because the first thing he learned was the damn things actually explode—highly inflammatory oil in the seed pods—to send their seeds as far afield as possible. Lovely piece of bioengineering.

And, as it turned out, the hopfish *did* devastate the tender young shoots of the pyromaniac. Unless there was a fire to cut back on the hopfish population at seeding time.

The pyromaniac plants saw to it there was, of course. The grumblers took care of the hopfish that didn't asphyxiate. Wonderful the way these things work.

You can't help but admire nature.

At least, I can't. That's what I was doing when Irizarry stuck his head into the lab. "Annie, this was your idea. You're coming with me."

"Everybody's out of Milo's Ford?"

"Lock, stock, and barrel."

"Let me call Leo. He won't want to miss this."

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"He's waiting in the hover."

Thoughtful man, Irizarry. He wasn't nearly as scandalized as Susan usually was when Leo and I spent the trip necking in the back seat.

"Heads up, folks," Irizarry said at last. "We're here." He brought the craft to a standstill, hovering just outside the edge of Milo's Ford. The forest around it was still green but you could see the swollen seeds on the ballyhoos, just waiting for their chance. The only thing that'd be left standing after fire swept this area would be the ballyhoos—and the pretty little frame houses in Milo's Ford, all made of that same fireproof ballyhoo wood.

Irizarry handed a box over the seat back. "They're on five-minute timers, Annie. I wanted to make sure we could get safely clear. I'm going to make a long pass all around the town. Clelie will give us the go-ahead when the ground personnel decide the wind is right." He nodded vaguely in the direction of the comunit. He had the damnedest look on his face.

"Why are you handing them to me?" I asked.

"Because I don't want to do it. It feels wrong to me. This was your idea—*you* do it."

"Okay." I glanced at Leo. "Is this going to bother *you?*"

"Only if you don't share," he said.

So I divvied them up between us, we opened windows on opposite sides of the hovercraft, and then we waited. After what seemed like forever, Clelie's voice came over the comunit, "Everybody's clear and the wind is right, Tomas—go!"

He did—and Leo and I dropped incendiaries the length of the run. By the time we reached the river, the first of them had gone up and caught with a vengeance. Irizarry goosed the hovercraft and *moved!*

At the top of the rise, he brought it to an abrupt halt and swung us around to face the town. He whistled. "Annie, I didn't believe you. I didn't think it would catch that easily."

"Now you know," I said. "This way, the hazard gets cleared and the townsfolk can move back in safely. At least for another fifteen years or thereabouts. This time, a controlled burn was the best solution for everybody and everything concerned. Next time—well, next time we'll have to think about it all over again." I leaned back against Leo and watched the fire spread. All around Milo's Ford, the last of the ballyhoos were going up like fireworks.

"You know," I said, surprised at myself, "I think I'm admiring my handiwork."

Leo laughed. "You're my favorite force of nature, Annie." ●

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NEXT ISSUE:

Hugo-and-Nebula winner **Joe Haldeman** returns to these pages after a long absence next month with our sizzling April cover story, "The Hemingway Hoax." In this vivid and fast-moving novella, what starts out as a relatively harmless literary hoax soon plunges us deep into an intricate maze of intrigue, murder, betrayal, and time travel, and through a succession of strange Alternate Realities, as cosmic forces fight it out in a battle that may determine the fate of humanity itself. This is Haldeman at his most compelling—don't miss it.

ALSO IN APRIL: **S.P. Somtow** (also known by some as **Somtow Sucharitkul**) takes us to one of the strangest and most evocative worlds you're ever likely to experience—modern-day Bangkok—for a fast, funny, and-gonzo look at the *very* strange things that happen on "Lottery Night"; **John Barnes** returns with a poignant and unsettling look at just how much we have to lose, as a man on the eve of the Last Battle ponders "My Advice to the Civilized"; Nebula-and-World Fantasy Award winner **Kim Stanley Robinson** treads the nightmare line between dream and reality, in "Before I Wake"; new writer **Kristine Kathryn Rusch** shows us a Close Encounter with a spirit of a very different kind, in the haunting "Trains"; and **Esther M. Friesner** takes us to Ancient Briton, to a time when the power of the Roman Legions is on the wane, for a surprising and very funny look at the roots of Legend, and at events frustrating and hilarious enough to drive you right "Up The Wall." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our April issue on sale on your newsstands on March 6, 1990.

COMING SOON: big new novellas by **Pat Murphy, Walter Jon Williams,** and **James Patrick Kelly.**

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Science Horror

Carrion Comfort

By Dan Simmons

Dark Harvest, $21.95

Dan Simmons' SF novel, *Hyperion*, was so impressive that it seemed a good idea to check out his new novel, *Carrion Comfort*, which on the surface looks very much like a horror novel. But is it? Well, we get into the dreary business of definition. Most so-called horror novels use the stuff of fantasy (supernatural beings—vampires et al.) to evoke the traditional thrills and chills. But the (arguably) first SF novel ever, *Frankenstein*, used science to raise the goose bumps, and that has been an on-and-off crossover tradition since, especially in the movies, where for most of this century science and horror were almost inseparable. *Carrion Comfort* is a mostly successful example of same; the horrors (totally amoral people with the ability to make others into controlled zombies) are given a scientific rationale ("faulty mutations [from] a million years of breeding for interpersonal dominance . . ." and an ability to transmit neurochemical commands to other minds). Mind-controlling telepathic mutants are not exactly a new gimmick in SF; Simmons presents them in a contemporary setting, throws in a fair amount of gore and paranoia-inspiring power plays and comes up with a rip-roaring horror extravaganza.

Three old people have a reunion in Charleston, S.C.; they have been friends since the halcyon days between the wars. Two are aging Charleston belles: Melanie is a sweet little old lady settled into gracious old age; Nina lives in New York and is a power-mongering businesswoman. The third is a German, Wili, who is now a successful film producer based in America. They are "Users." Their game, for years, has been to feed on other people's minds, controlling, and sometimes killing for the mental input. Each has a servant (Wili has two) who has been mind-controlled for so long that s/he is virtually an extension of the User's will.

After going over their various User exploits, Wili departs. There is a long-delayed power struggle between the women (Using their minions); Melanie emerges the winner, Nina and the others being killed gruesomely, as are several innocent bystanders who have gotten in the way or been Used —literally to death. Charleston is stunned by what seems to be a series of randomly executed murders by people who had no motives to kill each other. Melanie decides to

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depart to France, and as we follow her flight, it becomes evident that she is more than a little demented.

Enter the good guys: Natalie, a black college student, is the daughter of an innocent man who was killed in the Melanie-Nina fracas; Saul is a Polish psychiatrist who has come to America by way of Israel and was once Used by a Nazi officer in a death camp, an experience he has never forgotten; and Rob, the local sheriff, who despite the appearance of redneck law officer, is literally a gentleman and a scholar. Saul has appeared because he has heard of the inexplicable mass murder and suspects that Wili is the user he had encountered so long ago and sought ever since, both as a Nazi and as a phenomenon Saul has never been able to explain.

These three, baffled by the strange circumstances of the mass slaughter, begin to guess the secret of the Users, and set out initially to track down Melanie and Wili, who has, just to add to the confusion, supposedly been killed in a plane crash (which was engineered by Nina). The trail is a long one (it's a *very* long novel). What Natalie & Co. *don't* know is that Wili is involved with a cabal of Users who are the very highest echelons of business and government, and their initial probings set off a chain of circumstances involving these people, the (Used) FBI, more killings, and the mad Melanie. You'd think the three innocents wouldn't stand a chance, but they are aided by an odd set of circumstances (Simmons, like all good writers, can make coincidence seem inevitable) including Saul's contacts with Israeli intelligence and the paranoid mentalities of the Users, who are as much engaged in power plays and killings of their own as protecting themselves from outsiders.

Locations shift to Philadelphia, Hollywood, Germany, Israel, and France, and Simmons, with fiendish cleverness, works in real people and events just short, I'd think (I *hope*), of libel. (The story takes place mostly in 1981, and there is particular use of an event in Philadelphia that made national headlines that year that is startling, to say the least.) There are enough bloody killings and animated semicorpses with lethal intent to satisfy the most blood-crazed reader, but Simmons juggles it all with —er—taste isn't quite the word, but with enough sensibility to make the reader know that there's more to the novel than grue. The climax comes on an island where the User cabal engages in a week-long hunt of victims (Natalie notes that she's seen it on the Late Show in *The Most Dangerous Game*), and everyone involved that has survived is present, if only vicariously (mad Melanie is, of course, the wild card).

Simmons has followed the rules of both SF and the modern horror novel, and *Carrion Comfort* is successful on both fronts, as well as being compulsively readable. If one

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must pick nits, one might want less cliched villains than leftover Nazis, TV evangelists, and the FBI. And maybe the story sags a little after the first half, when the machinations of *everybody* get a little tangled. But for the most part, and despite the large cast of major characters, it's a clear, straightforward story, a startling contrast to the complex, many-layered *Hyperion*. Simmons is not only good, he's versatile, and it's a pleasure to know that that first award-winning novel of his (*Song of Kali*) was not a flash in the pan.

Bull's Falcon

Falcon
By Emma Bull
Ace, $3.95 (paper)

Dominic Glyndwr, Viscount Harlech, aka Niki, is something of a playboy prince, third in line to the throne (or equivalent) of the planet Cymru which, if you hadn't already guessed, was settled by a culture with a strong Welsh heritage. However, don't expect one of those fey pieces of Celtic SF that's more twee than tech. Cymru is an up-to-date independent planet whose heritage shows up mostly in its names and oaths.

Niki returns to the palace from a summer vacation to find the capital city near revolt and his family near chaos. Both of these have been caused by the behavior of the ruling prince, Pedr, Niki's uncle. The first half of Emma Bull's *Falcon* is devoted to Niki's growing involvement with what might be considered the forces of rebellion on the planet, i.e., the lower classes, and his growing awareness that someone is manipulating his uncle in the subtlest of ways. He becomes something of an instant folk hero to the masses, but only after his family is slaughtered does he learn that the villain is an agent of the Concorde, an interstellar superpower with designs on Cymru. Niki is forced to flee off planet.

This would be pretty standard stuff, but Bull makes it wonderfully resonant with the unforced, believable details of a high tech monarchy and a superbly realized cast of characters, mainly Niki's royal family: brother Rhys; Uncle Pedr and his bright and beautiful young wife, Kitty; Niki's scientist mother, Morwenna, who renounced the throne in Pedr's favor to devote her life to research and who confesses to Niki that he was the result of an experiment in parthenogenesis. Their family conversations are hardly the stuff of Ruritanian royalty; more like what real royals such as the Windsors might sound like if they were brighter than they seem.

That's half the novel. The second half begins some time later—the refugee prince has become a gestalt pilot, part of an experimental program to combine pilot and ship. Niki is the twelfth experimental subject, the last and the most successful; he is also dying from its effects. He is approached by Chrysander Harris, a pop singer of interstellar fame who wants to be

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ferried back to his home world, Lamia. The major problem is that Lamia is under the Silence, a total state of siege imposed by—you guessed it—the Concorde.

The roundabout voyage to Lamia is full of suprises, some of which are supplied by Laura Brass, female space pilot and killer *par excellence*, and Jhari Sabayan, former lover of Niki's and now a top agent for the Concorde, an anti-heroine if ever there was one. Chrysander also has a few things to hide, including his freak ability to coerce with his voice, and so, in fact, does the planet of Lamia. Coincidences abound as the first part of the book is tied to the second, but as noted above, it's a good author's task to make coincidence seem inevitable. The action index is upped in this part, which diminishes Bull's opportunity to create character and culture, and sometimes the complications of her story trip it up a bit, but as a whole, the novel scores a bull's eye indeed.

Cineverse

Slaves of the Volcano God
By Craig Shaw Gardner
Ace, $3.95 (paper)

Slaves of the Volcano God by Craig Shaw Gardner has to do with —as you might guess from the title—old movies. More specifically, it has to do with the *cineverse*, multiple universes based on various film genres. It's a logical spinoff from the literary universes that go as far back as de Camp and Pratt's Harold Shea stories, and could be a funny idea.

Here a slightly nerdish type named Roger, who works in public relations, careers through various of these universes—the pirate movie universe, the wild western universe, the jungle movie universe —in search of his beloved Delores, who has been kidnapped by the dread Doctor Dread, who goes "hee-heehee" a lot. Access to these various cineverses is gained by Captain Crusader Decoder Rings, one of which Roger has saved from his childhood.

Gardner chooses to broadly spoof genre movies as he goes, and the problem is that the results just aren't very funny. The various genre universes seem more like clichéd movie takeoffs than clichéd movies—this sort of thing has been done so much over the years that it needs a real talent for satire to bring off. To see how it's done, I suggest reruns of the old Carol Burnett show—there were the ultimate sendups of old movies.

Robin's Robin

The Outlaws of Sherwood
By Robin McKinley
Ace, $3.95 (paper)

I missed Robin McKinley's *The Outlaws of Sherwood* when it appeared in hardcover a year or so back, but I'd heard enough good things about it to regret doing so—so here's an assessment on its appearance in paperback.

One of the reasons I let it go by initially was that the legend of Ro-

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bin Hood has never been a favorite of mine, and that was because—no magic. Even Errol Flynn couldn't remedy that lack. However, I should have known that Robin McKinley, at least judging by her handling of "Beauty and the Beast" in *Beauty*, would bring her own special magic to it. Indeed she has, though there's still no *overt* fantasy in the novel.

In a way, in fact, she has defantasized the story, but in the best possible manner, giving it a very modern, realistic treatment. For instance, did you ever wonder how a bunch of Saxon peasants *became* this band of superarchers with the kind of woodcraft that would put a troupe of merit badge Boy Scouts to shame? Peasants were farmers, for heaven's sakes, and usually never got within a mile of a bow—cudgels were the weapon of choice—and never went into the forest if they could help it. As I remember, Howard Pyle never tackled this particular practical question; the movie certainly didn't.

McKinley justifies this cleverly and with humor. Robin is a subapprentice forester, so he indeed does know woodsy lore, though he's a pretty rotten archer. (A running gag throughout is that almost everybody eventually shoots better than Robin does.) When he does run afoul of the law (by killing a bullying minion of the chief forester who is a toady of the nasty Sheriff of Nottingham), he decides to escape into the forest, rather unwillingly taking with him a small band of other Saxon malcontents. A major problem with these clods is that they keep getting lost, and Robin has to run a course in finding your way in the woods before anything else is done.

With luck (a mild winter), the band survives, and since England is not a happy place at the time, what with Richard off to the wars and John pigging it up as Regent, others try to join Robin's band. Most he passes on with a farthing or two to some sort of safe locale, a few he allows to stay. We see his first encounter with Little John with the gratifying battle on the log and subsequent dunkings, and young nobleman Will Scarlet's entrance (in red leather: "—er—the colour is not very practical, is it?" Robin: "One could run a pole across your shoulders and stake you out at any corner of the tourney ground with the other banners.") The solitary friar called Tuck is sought for doctoring and becomes involved despite himself. The minstrel Alan-a-Dale appears (he's something of a wimp, but proves his worth) and even a few women stay on a determinedly equal basis with the men.

Luckiest of all, Robin (whose mother was of good birth) has grown up with a daughter of local gentry named—you guessed it—Marion. She's a whiz with a bow, and while she can't live in the forest, she comes and goes frequently, acting as mole in the ruling Norman camp. And the Sheriff gets more and more annoyed as the King's deer keep disappearing and Normans are robbed on the highway

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with greater frequency. The archery contest, which always seemed the most unlikely part of the tale, is given quite a new twist here (a troupe of strolling players plays a grand part), and results in a nasty showdown of the outlaw band with Guy of Gisbourne, a terminator type brought in by the Sheriff in desperation.

All ends satisfyingly and well, and *convincingly*, to boot. *The Outlaws of Sherwood* gives us Robin & Friends as a likable, practical, humorous bunch of real young people surviving in a tough spot, with whom it's a pleasure to share adventures. No magic (though the book is labeled *Fantasy*), but for once I didn't care—I had a grand time in Sherwood.

More Woods

Witchwood

By John Buchan
Carroll & Graf, $4.50 (paper)

John Buchan is best-known as the author of *The 39 Steps* and other such thrillers, but he had a streak of the fantastic in him, and there were short stories and novels that headed in that direction. His *Witchwood* was listed by Moorcock and Cawthorn in *Fantasy: the 100 Best Books*, so with the publication of a new edition I thought it should be checked out.

It is set in the seventeenth century, in Scotland. The idea is these days a more than familiar one, but had the fresh quality of being original when it was published in 1927. A young minister is assigned to the isolated village of Woodilee, which is nearly surrounded by a forest called "The Black Wood" or, more traditionally, Melanudrigill.

The story is simply his discovery of a coven which operates in Woodilee, celebrating the old festivals in the Wood, and his struggles with the villagers to stamp it out, and with his superiors, who refuse to believe him. It's all curiously impersonal, and by our horror movie-trained conventions, rather dry and lacking in confrontational drama. On the other hand, it is an absorbing glimpse of a farming village of the time, almost totally isolated from events in the outside world. Buchan gives it an air of reality which would be lacking in anything more melodramatic. The fantasy content is, at best, debatable; only the fate of the leader of the coven might—just might—be brought about by supernatural forces of the Wood.

And stand warned, most of the dialogue is in near incomprehensible Scots dialect—"I've a name for takin' a stoup ower muckle, and when the folk thocht I was fou, my lugs were as gleg as a maukin's." (There is a glossary in the back of the book, which I discovered too late.) Despite all the caveats, however, those who were raised on the leisurely and sometimes difficult British fantasies that were around before Americans started writing the stuff will probably enjoy *Witchwood*; those who want speed, gore, and instant comprehensibility should steer clear.

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Once and Future War

Final Blackout

By L. Ron Hubbard

Bridge Publications $16.95

L. Ron Hubbard was, of course, a mainstay of *Astounding* and *Unknown* back in the 1940s along with all those greats that John W. Campbell had gathered to remake American SF and (further down the line) fantasy. One is perforce curious about these early magazine writings. Were they simply eclipsed by Hubbard's controversial later career, or did they not stand the test of time as did those of his peers? I'd guess the former, judging by the reissue of *Final Blackout*, one of his best known novels, first published in *Astounding* in 1940.

It is set in the aftermath of a World War (WWII had not yet happened when it was written, mind you) in which atomic and bacteriological weapons had been used. Europe is devastated; Russia is again under a czar; Britain has become communist; France, a putative monarchy, is in ruins, as is Germany. The protagonist of the story is the Lieutenant, a young officer who has gone to Europe as part of a British Expeditionary Force and is now leading a ragtag brigade of under two hundred men, nominally under orders from what's left of the British command. In reality, they're living off the country, skirmishing with whatever troops they come across, and more or less a war band unto themselves. (British troops abroad are in exile since they're forbidden to return home because of the "Soldier's Disease," an artificial plague.)

The Lieutenant is the perfect military man, and the novel relates how he and his fanatically loyal brigade return to England, oust the currently corrupt regime of the shattered country, and rebuild it. There is a bitter twist at the end which is astonishingly contemporary.

Though there's some crudity in the writing and a certain amount of datedness (surprisingly little, in point of fact), what's impressive about the novel is its spare, lean style. There's no romantic subplot, no melodramatics—it's quite unlike anything from the magazines of the time (the contemporary that comes most to mind is Hemingway, of all people, just in the stark economy of the prose). In a way, *Final Blackout* might be considered the granddaddy of all the Survivalist novels we've had in the past decade, and is better done than ninety-nine percent of them.

Recent publications from those associated with this magazine include: *Norby and Yobo's Great Adventure* by Janet and Isaac Asimov (Walker, $13.95).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, Suite 133, 380 Bleecker St., N.Y., N.Y. 10014. ●

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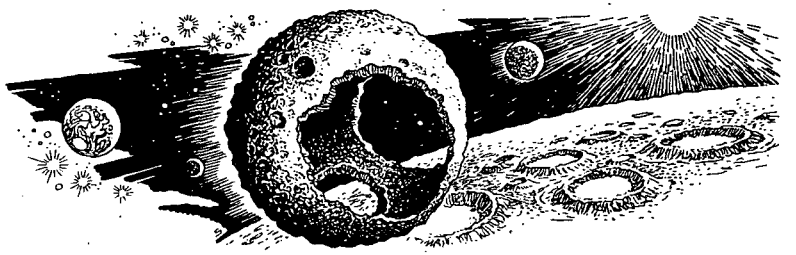

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

The SF con(vention) world is all set to swing into Spring, with new cons joining the traditional ones. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. Early evening's usually a good time to call cons (most are home phones; identify yourself and your reason for calling right off). When writing cons enclose an SASE (and again, make it plain just what it is you're asking about). Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, making music.

FEBRUARY, 1990

16-18—**Boskone**. For info, write: **Box G, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139**. Or call **(617) 625-2311** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Springfield MA (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests will include: Glen Gook, artist David Cherry. May be smaller, due to Boston WorldCon in 1989.

16-18—**Circle Ouroboros. (601) 693-0384**. Meridian MS. Somewhat oriented to gaming.

16-18—**MarsCon**. Sheraton Inn Coliseum, Hampton VA. C. Doran, K. Williams, B. Webster, R. Welch.

16-19—**CostumeCon. (818) 791-9195**. Red Lion Inn, Ontario CA. Historical, F & SF, future-fashions.

17—**Ufouni ve Slanem, % Ladislav Peska, Na dolikach 503, 274 01 Slany, Czechoslovakia**. O. Neff.

17-19—**EclectiCon**. Hilton, Sacramento CA. Poul & Karen Anderson, Bob Vardeman, artist A. Robins.

23-25—**Arisia**. Lafayette Hotel, Boston MA. Richard Bowker, A. C. Farley. Masquerade (weapons OK).

MARCH, 1990

2-4—**ConSonance, Box 29888, Oakland CA 94604. (415) 763-6415**. SF folksinging con, son of BayFilk.

9-11—**WisCon, Box 1624, Madison WI 53701. (608) 233-5640**. Emma Bull, Ian Banks. Feminism & SF.

16-18—**LunaCon, Box 338, New York NY 10150. (201) 696-9655 or 822-2461**. Tarrytown NY. K. Kurtz.

23-25—**Magnum Opus Con, Box 6585, Athens GA 30604. (404) 324-2559 or 549-1533**. Greenville SC.

29-Apr. 1—**NorwesCon, Box 24207, Seattle WA 98124. (206) 248-2010**. Mueller.

30-Apr. 1—**TechniCon, Box 256, Blacksburg VA 24063. (703) 953-1214**. Brown Center, VA Tech. Zelazny, Cramer, Mueller.

APRIL, 1990

13-15—**MiniCon, Box 8297, Lake Stn., Minneapolis MN 55408**. J. Yolen, Patrick Price, D. Romm.

AUGUST, 1990

23-27—**ConFiction, % Box 1252, BGS, New York NY 10274**. Hague, Holland. WorldCon. $70 in 1989.

30-Sep. 3—**ConDiego, Box 15771, San Diego CA 92115**. North American SF Con. $75 to 30 June '90.

AUGUST, 1991

29-Sep. 2—**ChiCon V, Box A3120, Chicago IL 60690**. WorldCon. Clement, Powers. $85 to 6/30/90.

AUGUST, 1992

28-Sep. 1—**MagiCon, Box 621992, Orlando FL 32862**. (407) 275-0027. The 1992 World SF Con. $50.

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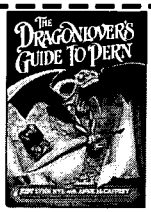

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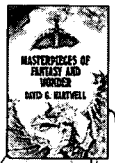

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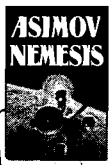

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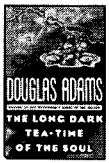

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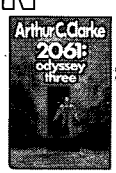

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